

Active Listening Strategies

If you experience hearing loss, the following active listening strategies will enhance your communication with other people to create a more positive communicative environment than hearing aids alone can provide.

- **Look at the person who is speaking.** Position yourself to get a full view of the face, not just a profile view. A lot of information can be obtained by watching as well as by listening. Although no one can gain all of the information by sight alone, everyone has some ability to speech read; that is, to obtain information on what is being said by watching a speaker's lips, facial expressions, gestures, body language, etc.
- **Wear your glasses when indicated.** They will help you to speech read.
- **Sit with your better ear, if one is better than the other, toward the speaker.**
- **Reduce the distance between you and the person talking.** The ideal distance is approximately three to five feet.
- **Avoid carrying on conversations from another room.**
- **Concentrate on the thought or ideas that the speaker is expressing** rather than straining to understand every word that is said. Don't get discouraged or give up if you miss a few words. Speech is commonly redundant and predictable.
- **Try to be aware of the topic of conversation and environmental cues** that may help you to make educated guesses. Friends can be coached to give occasional leads about the subject being discussed. They can unobtrusively say, "We are discussing the housing problem," or you might quietly ask someone in the group to tell you what they are discussing.
- **Become familiar with the way different people express themselves** such as facial expressions, vocabulary, sentence structure, accent or dialect, etc.
- **Maintain an active interest in people and events.** Knowledge about national and world affairs, as well as those of your community and friends, will help you to follow many discussions or conversations more readily.
- **Don't be afraid that people will think you are staring at them** while you are trying to understand what they are saying. It is always polite to look at the person who is talking.
- **Don't bluff and nod as if you understand when you don't.** It is better to ask questions than to continue along the wrong path.
- **Don't hesitate to ask someone to clarify information you may have missed.** In order to reduce frustration on both sides, it is helpful to be very specific about what you have missed so that the person does not have to repeat the whole message. You may also want to ask the person not just to repeat the information, but also to rephrase it so that words you have difficulty hearing can be replaced with words that are easier to hear.
- **Tell the speaker specifically which part of what they've just said you did not understand.** Merely saying, "I didn't hear," or "I didn't understand," doesn't give the speaker the necessary information to correct your problem. Tell them if they are speaking too softly, too rapidly, if their hand is in front of their mouth or if background noise is preventing you from understanding.
- **Work at listening** and do not get into the habit of allowing someone else, such as your spouse or friend, to listen for you.
- **Remember that conversation is a two-way interaction.** Do not monopolize it in an attempt to direct and control it. Listening takes more energy than talking.

- **Be willing to acknowledge your hearing loss and ask for help.** Most reasonable people will be glad to help if your request is specific and if they know what to do.
- **Don't hesitate to tell those around you what they can do to make communication easier.** Inform them of the importance of speaking more slowly, making sure that they are close to and facing you, as well as using facial expressions and gestures to get the message across. Many people are embarrassed because they have no idea how to talk with the wearer of hearing aids. Put them at ease and assure them that natural, unexaggerated speech is easiest for you to understand.
- Whenever possible, **ask for specifics**, such as directions or medical information, in writing.
- **Maximize the use of lighting.** Have the light behind you, not behind the speaker where it may cast a shadow.
- **Consider using hearing aids that have multiple microphones** that provide maximum amplification for sounds originating from directly in front of you and suppressing sounds originating from behind you.
- **Resist distractions.** Try to reduce or eliminate interfering background noise. This includes turning down or off the television, radio, running water or fan while conversing. In a social setting or restaurant, you may want to find a quieter corner away from the noise for your conversations.
- **If you are in a room with an open door or window facing a noisy or busy area, close it.** It also is helpful to keep the car window closed or lower the volume of the hearing aid that is closest to the window. Most hearing aids adjust to noise automatically.
- If needed, **consider improving the acoustics of a room** frequently used for conversation. This may involve installing carpeting, draperies, padded furniture or acoustic ceiling tiles.
- **When going to a restaurant, try to make plans in advance.** Look up noise ratings in the newspaper. Go during off-peak hours, reserve a table in a quiet corner and sit with your back against the wall (or toward the center of the room if wearing hearing aids with multiple microphones). Request a booth if available.
- When attending a play, concert, church service or lecture, try to arrive early so that you can **get a seat as close to the front as possible.** Request an assistive listening device.
- **When going to a movie or play, read the reviews or a summary of the plot in advance.**
- **When attending lectures, request that speakers use microphones or FM systems.**
- **When taking information over the telephone, repeat back what you heard to verify that it was correct.**
- **Maintain realistic expectations** about what you will be able to hear in various situations and environments. There will be some situations where listening will be more difficult, and you will need to use more effort and strategies to follow what has been said. Remember that this is true for listeners with normal hearing, as well.
- **Check the situation in public places before blaming your hearing loss.** Find out if others are having difficulty, too. It may be due to a faulty public address (PA) system, a poor speaker, or high background noise.
- **Pay particular attention to your own speech.** A long-standing hearing loss, or even a sudden loss, may cause a deterioration of voice and enunciation.
- **Everyone needs time to relax.** Recognize that illness and fatigue will make listening more difficult. Allow yourself the luxury of withdrawing at times.
- **Avoid tension.** Try to relax and keep your sense of humour. Tension interferes significantly with the ability to speech read and drains energy. It is not possible for even the best of listeners to hear everything. The ability to laugh at yourself is a great help in adjusting to any situation or condition.