

Hearing In Noise

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I never thought I would get to a point in my life when I didn't want to meet friends and family in a restaurant or attend a party. Yet several years ago, it did happen. When I started to refuse invitations to go out because I wanted to avoid a night of tough hearing, I knew it was time to act.

I mentioned my dilemma to my audiologist and asked if there were adjustments he could make to my aids. At the time, he didn't have much to offer, but he was willing to listen to my concerns. He noticed that I was good at lip reading, and thought a few sessions with a speech therapist might help me learn to concentrate and speech read. Speech reading is an extension of lip reading, and takes into account body language, lip movement, and context.

Sessions with a speech therapist are expensive. My audiologist and I figured out that my insurance required the authorization of an ENT Physician before they would cover the sessions. Once that hurdle was crossed, I made the appointment. On my first visit, my speech therapist evaluated how I heard in noise, using background music. She recommended a series of Apps, most made for children and some that included hearing in noise. She further said that I should spend time in noise every day, whether it be going out, or talking to my husband with music or television as background noise.

My insurance allowed 6 weekly visits. During my sessions, my speech therapist taught me to pay attention to her mouth as she said consonants, vowels, and words. She asked me to pay close attention to her lips, eyes, facial expressions, and body language as she spoke. She instructed me how to fill in the blanks of the words I did hear with those I did not hear and interpret what was said based on context. For homework, she had me converse with my husband in noise and to look in the mirror as I sounded out consonants, vowels, and words.

It was a busy six weeks. With practice I became better at speech reading. It is a

skill I continue to develop.

There are other methods that I use to hear in noise. When meeting friends at a restaurant, my husband and I arrive ahead of our reservation so that I can choose a table in the corner with a seat up against a wall. Most of my friends know that being seated at such tables helps me to hear. They, too, attempt to make this accommodation for me.

Large parties and gatherings will always make me feel that I'm entering the no-hearing zone. Several years ago, I remember being at a neighborhood Christmas party and meeting up with a woman who has hearing loss. We both stood on the sidelines, deciding that though we loved Christmas carols, we would have paid the pianist to stop playing them.

To cope at large gatherings, I stay on the sidelines and let people come to me. I update my hearing aids and add peripheral devices when new technology comes out. These days, I circulate through a crowd with my mini mic. Most hearing aid and cochlear implant manufacturers offer mini mics, some are made for a one-on-one conversation while others can pick up the conversation of multiple people. Check with your audiologist to see what works best with your hearing devices.

These solutions are far from adequate. Most with hearing loss will still struggle whenever they find themselves amidst a cacophony of voices. I wish I had the perfect advice for hearing in noise, but I don't. All we can do is arm ourselves with the best hearing tools possible. If you are able, take a speech reading course. Spend time every day in noise, turn on music or the television and strike up a conversation with family members. Don't isolate. Socialize as much as you can, even if it is exhausting. Find your own way with hearing in noise. Ultimately adapting to your own best practices is the best way to meander through the hearing world.