

## Overcoming The Embarrassment Of Hearing Loss

By Linda Bilodeau

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Several months ago, I was in the post office and noticed a woman with a service dog. Not seeing anything visibly wrong with this woman, I wondered if her canine friend was a hearing dog so I struck up a conversation with her. My well-intentioned discourse with her quickly fell apart. She made it clear to me that her reasons for getting a service dog were her own.

Most people with handicaps consider the particulars of their situation private. Yet, I've had many talks with those suffering from hearing loss who were willing to share their stories with me. They've explained their difficulties socializing, doing business, and forming and keeping close relationships. I believe that most with hearing loss don't feel handicapped until they go into a noisy pharmacy to pickup medication only to find that navigating through a conversation with a pharmacist or staff is surreal. Sometimes, those, suffering from hearing loss, feel less than adequate to handle their own affairs causing them to question how to define themselves.

I understand the problem. Even with top-of-the-line hearing aids that pair with a phone and other peripheral devices, I'm often caught up in a sea of hearing issues when doing business or socializing. This was true the other night when my husband decided to take me out to dinner. The restaurant was busy and the background noise was bothersome. To better hear my husband, I switched to my mini mic. Most mini mics are built for a one-on-one conversation, so when the waitress came to tell us about the evening's special's, I couldn't hear her. I had to rely on my husband to translate. This always creates an awkward situation because the waiter or waitress ends up staring at me, wondering why my husband is repeating everything he or she said. Usually my husband notices these looks, and he tells the waitstaff that I have difficulty hearing.

Though I don't mind my husband stepping in and explaining my predicament, I do mind that I don't have better options. I've been wearing hearing aids for over 40 years and have seen great improvements in technology. I don't think anyone would argue that we need more. Wouldn't it be heaven if restaurants installed hearing loops and handed you a list of daily specials in writing. Wouldn't we all live better with more advanced hearing devices and peripherals.

Until society takes hearing loss more seriously and until research catches up with our needs, we must rely on what we have, friends and family to help us. However, even the most well-intentioned human interactions can sour. I have friends who are very kind, who stand near me at parties and make sure I am included in conversation. They do so discreetly. They speak slowly and distinctly. However I've had other acquaintances who were overly curious when discovering that I have hearing loss. They think nothing of firing dozens of personal questions at me, making me feel like a zoo specimen. I end up saying that I'm no different from anyone else. I simply cannot hear normally.

I don't mind some questions about how I manage my life, but I do mind having to relate inner feelings about my hearing loss to acquaintances. Like most with a handicap, I draw the limit line about what I am willing to say about myself. Dealing with hearing loss is individualistic. We should tell people on a need-to-know basis that we have hearing loss. Giving instruction such as please speak a little slower or with a little more volume might be the best way to help yourself and those you deal with. Beyond that, we have to decide what we are willing to say when asked about our hearing loss.

My hair dresser is the best example of a person who has the right touch of dealing with someone with hearing loss. Because her husband has hearing loss, she learned the tricks of patiently repeating, of making sure she has your attention, and of speaking slowly and distinctly. She does these things in a dignified manor, without making you feel like less of a person.

I give the staff in my doctor's office low marks when dealing with me. Though the fact that I have hearing loss is recorded in my chart, they make little accommodation for me. If I bring up the fact that I have hearing loss, they speak too loudly or unnaturally slow. Always, they wear puzzling looks, indicating they are at a lost about dealing with someone with hearing loss. This is where educating people helps. However, anyone who has had hearing loss for a while knows that explanations are short lived. Most people can't or choose not to remember how best to communicate. It's a sad reality that we, suffering from hearing loss, face.

Only you can make the choice of how to deal with hearing loss publicly. In your meanderings through the hearing world, you may find kind souls who will truly help you hear, and just as true, you may find others who will not. How we handle those difficult situations and how much we are willing to say about ourselves says a lot about who we are and how we get along with our inability to hear normally.