

What Matters Most With Hearing Loss

By Linda Bilodeau

June 2021

I value my personal and professional relationships. Yet, I find that hearing loss has complicated how I relate to people. Meeting new people is troublesome. I weigh and measure how much I should say about my hearing loss. Worse, I find asking for help difficult.

How can we make our hearing experiences easier? We have to understand that normal hearing people take hearing for granted. They get up in the morning, splash water on their faces and actually hear water running. They don't have to watch the toaster, they can hear a golden brown toast popping up. They don't have to stand at attention near their coffeemakers and microwaves. When their phones ring, they pick up calls and carry on normal conversations. While listening to music and watching television, they hear every note and all the dialogue. Their ability to hear, automatically, makes it tough for them to understand the particulars of hearing loss.

To make matters worse hearing loss is invisible. Unless you tell someone about your hearing loss, chances are people will assume that your hearing is fine. Even if someone spots your implant or hearing aids, they might believe that your devices bring your hearing to the same levels as theirs.

How can those of us with hearing loss bridge the gap between ourselves and those who can hear? Hearing professionals suggest that you not only disclose your hearing loss, but that you provide specific instructions on your hearing needs. With various types of hearing loss and because of the uniqueness of our hearing devices, we all have different hearing needs. One set of helpful hints won't meet the needs of everyone with hearing loss. We are left determining what is best for us, given the hearing situation we find ourselves in.

Disclosing one's hearing loss and asking for help means taking a risk. There are misconceptions about hearing loss. Some equate an inability to hear as a defect. Some might go as far as to wonder if you suffer a loss of mental acuity. There will always be those who lack patience and refuse to repeat or to speak slowly and clearly. There will always be those who insist on calling you though you've said you prefer email or texting. I have had instances where my husband and I met new couples, and while we seemed to connect, we were told that they couldn't deal with my hearing loss. It is painful when this happens. You feel out of control and hurt. However, you come to realize that people like that need to find their own way. They are not for you.

I've read stories of men and women who left their jobs because they couldn't hear well or because of misunderstandings with management or co-workers. I left a university teaching job and other management jobs because of my hearing. Those were not easy decisions to make. We must understand that even though we might have a sympathetic boss and coworkers and that the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects our rights, we still might find ourselves in impossible situations.

Living with hearing loss doesn't mean our lives will be out of our control. We must decide if we want to disclose our hearing loss. We must determine when and if we are going to ask for help. We have to determine what hearing environments and situations work best, given our issues.

Ultimately, letting someone you trust know about your hearing loss might lead to help. There will be those those willing to speak a bit slower, those willing to repeat, and kind souls who will want to make you part of their conversations. I have such friends. They are lovely women who want to talk with me and who want me to enjoy socializing with them. I welcome their words when they say: "How can I help you hear?"

We can help ourselves by treating our hearing loss, by wearing our devices, and by visiting our audiologists regularly. We can also let others know how they can

help us hear. Talking about your hearing needs might make those meanderings through the hearing world a little easier.