

STRATEGIES TO HELP SENIORS WITH HEARING LOSS LIVE INDEPENDENTLY

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Being able to hear adequately is a vital part of living independently:

- 1) Adequate hearing is important for safety issues and knowing what is happening around you;
- 2) Hearing is important in developing and maintaining contact with others, assuring a sense of connection and social support;
- 3) Hearing is important in staying connected to what is going on and to processing information. Researchers have found a significant link between having a hearing loss and developing dementia.

BASIC CONSIDERATIONS

There are many creative and practical strategies to help you overcome some of the challenges of hearing loss. Some are things you may not have tried before, but they can make a huge difference.

In order to help you figure out better approaches to hearing challenges, you must first discover the reasons you are having trouble with your hearing. You may need someone to help you figure this out. The overview below addresses the most frequent causes of hearing loss in older adults.

The ear is divided into 3 key areas where sound travels before it reaches the brain for interpretation. These are usually labeled the Outer Ear, Middle Ear, and Inner Ear.

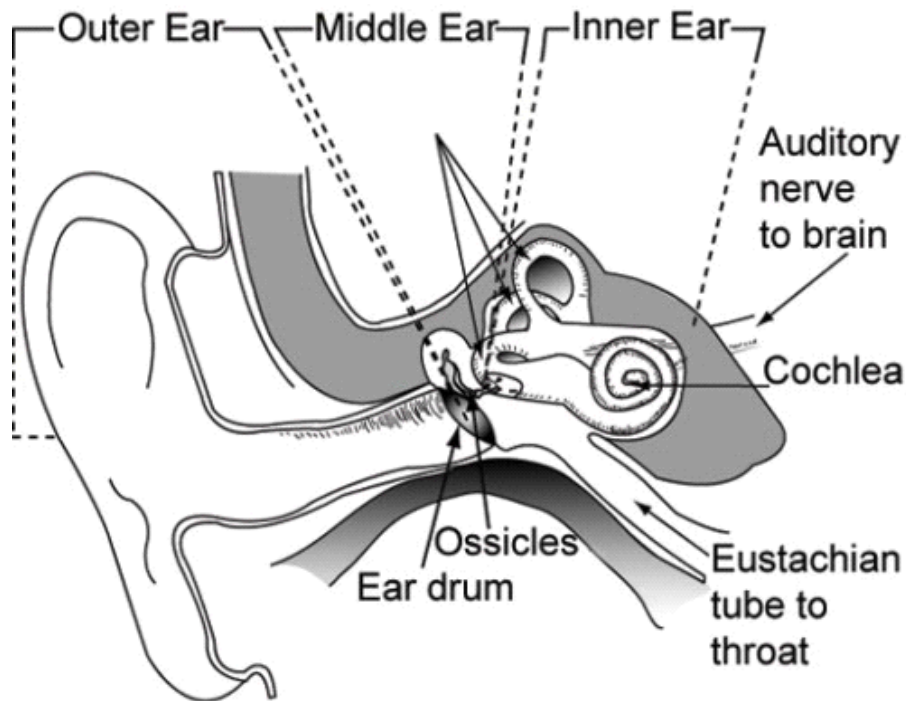


Figure 1: The Outer, Middle, and Inner Ear

If the cause of the hearing loss is in the outer ear, it is often due to a buildup of wax that blocks the sound. This occurs frequently in older adults. A doctor or nurse can safely clean wax from the ear with the proper supplies.

An ear infection is the most common problem affecting the middle ear. This usually needs to be treated with an antibiotic by a Primary Care Provider. There are other middle ear problems that can sometimes be corrected with surgery.

When the problem is in the inner ear, it usually means there has been nerve damage. This is often the result of noise exposure, side-effects of medication, or the aging process itself. Recent developments of Cochlear Implant technology may offer a surgical option to older individuals with sensory neural hearing losses.

Problems of hearing may lie beyond the ear itself, in an area of the brain that processes incoming signals, sorts them out, and interprets them. When the problem is in this area, it is an auditory processing or interpretation problem.

Often the sound is plenty loud when it reaches the brain, but the person just can't make sense of it. These characteristics are often seen in older people with dementia.

A Clinical Audiologist, certified by the American Speech-Language and Hearing Association, can provide specific diagnostic information coupled with an examination by the Primary Care Provider. This information will help you and your family explore any medical interventions that may be available. Medicare pays for hearing evaluations but does not, at this point, typically pay for hearing aids.

In the meantime, your challenge is how to work around your hearing difficulty so it doesn't interfere with your independence.

KEY STRATEGIES TO HELPING PEOPLE WITH HEARING LOSS LIVE INDEPENDENTLY

- Today there are many, often inexpensive, assistive devices that can help amplify sound or provide visual stimuli (such as closed captions on TV or a flashing light on the phone) or that vibrate to get a person's attention.
- Hearing aids can be custom fit by a Clinical Audiologist in a local office or by following on-line hearing testing. These hearing aids are usually designed to amplify the frequencies where the person is having trouble. They often feature a custom fitted personalized earmold. These hearing aids typically cost from \$1,000 to \$5,000.
- Some people with a hearing loss successfully use much less expensive "hearing enhancers." These look like hearing aids but were originally designed for hunters and others to amplify the sounds around them. These have a standard ear mold and can be found in drug stores, Walmart,

sporting goods stores, and on-line. They range in price from about \$40 to several hundred dollars.

- Table top amplification devices that use earphones or ear buds enhance the sound of conversational speech, lectures, television, etc. They can be used just for special occasions or set up in specific places for use.
- Beware of tiny all-in-the-ear hearing aids that are widely advertised for the cosmetic value of not being able to see them. They are often difficult for older people to manage. Finger stiffness and problems with dexterity make it hard to adjust, charge, or change the batteries in this type of hearing aid.
- Also helpful: With practice, it is possible to learn to read lips, which can be useful in social situations.

HEARING ENHANCEMENT RESOURCES THAT MAY BE HELPFUL

Before you get a hearing aid or hearing enhancer, it is important to be cleared by your Primary Care Physician. Your doctor needs to make sure you don't have wax buildup or a middle ear infection. Once you have been cleared, you may wish to see if an inexpensive hearing enhancement device is helpful. If it is not useful, you can then try more expensive options to see if they make a difference. Some reasonably priced options that have good reviews include:

Vivtone Rechargeable Hearing Aids for Seniors – 16 channel behind the ear devices – two – Amazon \$499

Hionec Rechargeable Hearing Aids for Seniors – 2 aids = \$185.99

Manzelun Hearing Aids for Seniors – Rechargeable – noise canceling – 2 aids
\$39.98

Most drug stores, Walmart, and Sporting Goods Stores have a wide variety of these instruments to choose from along with reviews.

Amplifiers may also be desk top models with earphones or ear buds and can be used for special events where their use is practical. These send the same sound to both ears so do not create the options that individual aids provide. Some you might check out include:

Reizen Loud Ear 110 dB gain (for very hard of hearing) Personal Amplifier from Amazon for \$34.99. Their instrument that is even louder for 120 dB gain is \$79.95 from Amazon.

Personal Sound Amplifier (A Hearing Amplifier with Earbuds) is available from Amazon for \$31.99.

Rechargeable Hearing Amplifier – Hearing Aid Personal Sound Device with earphones or earbuds is available from Amazon for \$99.

SuperEar Plus SE 7500 Personal Sound Amplifier with headphones and earbuds is available from Amazon for \$71.95

Other important information about amplification:

- 1) Always be sure devices are properly charged and the battery is protected and changed if needed;
- 2) Practice handling the battery and charging it properly until you are good at doing it; Seek help from a family member or a friend if you need assistance learning to take care of your device;
- 3) Always double check that it is working properly before putting it in your ear (otherwise you are further plugging up an ear that does not work well anyway);
- 4) A hearing device should NEVER be put into an ear that is draining or irritated. Consult your Primary Care Doctor at once. Earphones can be used instead until the problem has cleared.

Treat a new hearing aid or hearing enhancer the same way you would break in a new pair of shoes: Don't wear them too long in the beginning—begin with just an hour or two. Other tips:

- 1) Slowly work with turning the volume up until you get used to the sound and it seems comfortable;
- 2) Initially practice using it in a quiet setting with only one other person;
- 3) Next, try it with two or three others in a quiet setting;
- 4) Gradually increase the number of people and the background noise levels to get used to how it sounds.
- 5) Gradually increase the time you have them in your ears.



YOUR PERSONAL BOUNCE BACK APPROACH WHEN YOU HAVE TROUBLE HEARING

Ask yourself what needs to happen for you to successfully live independently. It is important to determine what the problems are before trying to solve them. This is not a “one size fits all” strategy. Start by consulting your physician to determine if your hearing problem can be resolved by simply removing wax or by treating an ear infection.

Things to consider:

1. Does your hearing loss put your safety at risk in case of a fire, tornado, someone at the door, etc.? If “yes” what technology, training, and

creativity can enable you to successfully overcome your problems? (For ideas and resources, see below: [Strategies for Greater Safety in the Presence of Hearing Loss](#))

2. Does the hearing loss interfere with your ability to communicate your needs to others—for getting supplies, food, medical care, etc.? (See [Strategies for Helping Those with a Hearing Loss Communicate Needs for Living Independently.](#))
3. Does your hearing loss interfere with your ability to socialize and stay connected with others? (See [Strategies for Helping People with a Hearing Loss Stay Socially Connected with Others.](#))
4. Does your hearing loss interfere with your ability to watch television, attend church or lectures, go to performances, etc.? (See [Strategies for Those with a Hearing Loss Having Success in Accessing Events or Entertainment.](#))



STRATEGIES FOR GREATER SAFETY IN THE PRESENCE OF A HEARING LOSS

Identify actions that are needed in the case of emergencies, then practice them until you are sure you can do what is needed. Ask a friend or family member to help you practice.



There are also a number of resources that may help. Visual options convert emergency phone signals to flashing lights and/or vibrations to alert someone with a significant hearing loss. These resources are available at Amazon and other on-line retailers:

Philmore LKG Phone Light Flasher and Ringer- Attaches to a landline and increases the volume and flashes a light for attention.

Amazon - \$20.99 (2024)

Krown Phone Strobe Flasher – Attaches to land line and flashes with incoming call.

Amazon - \$37.32 (2024)

TICCI Men and Women's Unisex 8 wrist vibrating alarm – watch with vibrating alarm that can be set for reminders,

Amazon - \$35.90 (2024)

Bellman and Symfrom Home Alerting System – Fire alarm system that includes bed shaker to alert someone who cannot hear the sound.
Amazon - \$479.90 (2024)

Early Alert- Tornado Warning Device
TA-01-14 – Bright strobe alert and loud warning with battery back-up.
Amazon - \$94.99 (2024)



CAPTEL – 2400 – Captioned Telephone.
Easy to utilize close captioned phone for 2-way interaction.
Amazon - \$75.01 (2024)

STRATEGIES TO HELP THOSE WITH HEARING LOSS COMMUNICATE NEEDS

The key for figuring strategies to meet your needs is to anticipate what they are and then develop a clear plan. Find the available resources and practice them until it works well. Your plan could include help from family or friends, scheduled trips or appointments, driving oneself, using public transportation, etc.

CLOSE CAPTIONING APPS FOR CELL PHONES

InnoCaption Live – Provides transcription and closed caption for cell phone calls. Can stream voice to hearing aids and cochlear implants..
Free – Google Play Store

CaptionCall – Provides installation of free phone number for sending and receiving captioned cell phone calls.

Free – Google Play Store

My SOS Family Alerts – Cell phone based alert button that contacts emergency services and designated contact persons.

Monthly Fee – Google Play Store

Getting Supplies and Food

All Types of supplies and food can be ordered or set up on a routine schedule through:

Amazon.com

Walmart.com

Various grocery stores

Door Dash

On-line restaurant ordering and delivery

Non-Technology Approaches:

Pencil and Paper

Dry Erase Board

Magic Slate



STRATEGIES TO HELP PEOPLE WITH HEARING LOSS REMAIN SOCIALLY CONNECTED



With or without amplification, it is often helpful for people with a hearing loss to understand what can help them succeed in social situations. It is unlikely anyone has ever worked with you on these principles. “Hearing Coaching” can help your efforts to function independently. Here are some important principles for successful social interaction when you have a hearing loss:

- Light on Face – Practice positioning yourself so the light is shining on the face of the speaker(s) so you can observe their mouth and facial expressions. This will provide cues to what is being said.
- Avoid Noise – Whenever possible, avoid high noise situations. Hearing enhancement devices amplify both conversational speech and the background noise, making it more difficult to follow what is being said than when you are in a quieter area.
- Watch faces – Practice watching lips and facial expression. Many people do this naturally. Focusing on the face can help fill in the information you cannot hear. An excellent tutorial can be found on YouTube: [Introduction to Lip Reading by George Valenta – CCC-SP.](#)

- Pay attention to Context – A critical element of lip reading is understanding the likely context of what is being said. If you know the conversation is about food or menu items, it is easier to figure out that everyone is talking about the banana pudding. If you know that everyone has gathered to watch a football game, you know the conversation is likely about sports and the teams that are playing.
- Ask to Repeat – Become comfortable asking people to repeat what they have just said or to rephrase it to help you understand.
- Choose Least Busy Times – In a busy restaurant it is usually less noisy and thus easier to hear at their non-peak hours. Sitting in a booth with high backs that shield the noise somewhat and in an area away from the kitchen or a band will also make hearing easier.
- Use written words or closed captioning – When communication is critical, writing down the words may help assure the message is understood by all parties.



STRATEGIES FOR THOSE WITH HEARING LOSS SUCCESSFULLY ACCESS TELEVISION, EVENTS, OR ENTERTAINMENT



AT HOME

Often the challenge in a person's own home is to be able to hear the television or even music without the required loudness level disturbing others in the household or even next door. Individual hearing amplifiers (previously described) may work very well.

Dampen Sound – You can add soft fabric furnishings, pillows, and throws that help absorb ambient sounds, making it easier to hear.

Move Closer – Simply move closer to the television. Simolio Portable Wireless Speakers (Amazon \$129.95) offers speakers you can move anywhere in the room so that the sound can be right next to the person with the hearing difficulty.

Ear Buds – Ampliconams Tv 3500 T.V. listening system provides high quality amplified sounds through individual ear buds. (Amazon - \$147.15)

Movies

Mandated Assisted Listening Devices – Since the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, movie theatres with fixed seating for 50 or more are required to provide some type of Assisted Listening Device for the hearing impaired. Call a theatre you are considering to see what they offer and how to reserve its use.

Locate the Speakers – Another option at the movies is to locate the speakers and sit near them, being sure to be seated in a way to also easily lip read the faces of the actors.



Auditoriums

Mandated Systems – Many auditoriums have a hearing loop (an induction loop or telecoil system) where the sound is transmitted to listeners through a cable that runs around the perimeter of the coverage area. The signal is then transmitted directly to the person's own hearing aid or listening device. Contact the venue in advance to see what is available.

Churches

Mandated Systems or Close Seating – Depending on the size of the church, they may also have listening enhancement devices available or an induction loop that works with a hearing aid. Sitting near the front to be able to see the pastor's facial expression and sitting away from other noises can also be very helpful.

Conclusion

Having a hearing problem need not dictate that you give up living independently. Creativity and problem solving can help you overcome the challenges that come with not hearing well and allow you to successfully live the life you desire.



YOU TUBE VIDEOS PROVIDE SOME ADDITIONAL HELPFUL GUIDANCE

Being Heard: Experiences of People with Mild Hearing Loss – Helps you understand the experiences of those with even a mild loss of hearing. 16 minutes

My Life with Hearing Loss: Amanda’s Story – Provides additional insight into bouncing back. 3 minutes

What You Don’t Know About Hearing Aids – Ted Talk – Juliette Sterkins. Insight into what hearing aids can and cannot do and ways to overcome the challenges. 18 minutes

Introduction to Lip Reading by George Valenta – A Tutorial in Learning Lip Reading – 27 minutes.

About the Author - Joe B. Adair, Ph.D., CCC-A-R

Dr. Adair is a Clinical Audiologist with over 20 years' experience working with elders who have hearing loss. As co-manager of a senior living community, he used his knowledge of audiology to help older adults find ways to tap into their resiliency potential in spite of hearing deficits.

Dr. Adair's can-do attitude brought residents of the elder community a sense of optimism and faith that they could overcome whatever obstacles they faced. His enthusiasm, coupled with practical advice demonstrates that older adults can live fully whatever their challenges. Dr. Adair has had extensive experience in applying principles of psychobiology to health care and helping people discover new potential for well-being and health.

