

## Compensate to Communicate: Talking to Someone with a Hearing Impairment

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According to the National Institute of Deafness and Communication Disorders (NIDCD), 20-30% of those 65 or older experience hearing loss; by 75, the percentage of those affected by hearing loss increases to 40-50%. Thus, it seems inevitable to encounter someone with hearing difficulties. Regardless of the reason for developing hearing loss, the impact of this common impairment is that many people feel embarrassed to not be functioning the same way they used to. In consequence, many may avoid socializing or it might appear that a loved one or colleague is depressed or being rude when in actuality, they simply cannot hear well and are sensitive to this loss. On the other hand, hearing loss can be so gradual that an individual does not realize his or her hearing is diminishing. This group is likely to continue everyday activities as usual, yet not understand why more miscommunication is occurring.

In *Gerontological Nursing: Competencies of Care*, psychologists Drs. Ayalon, Feliciano, and Arian list signs that indicate someone may have a hearing impairment: inattentiveness and/or inappropriate responses in conversation, asking repetitious questions or asking for words to be repeated, complaints that people mumble, development of a speech impediment, an increased reaction to loud sounds, unusually loud speech in conversations, tilting the head to the side, and increasing the volume on electronic devices. Any one or combination of these behaviors could indicate that someone may be experiencing hearing loss.

It can be challenging to communicate with someone with hearing difficulties, but there are many simple strategies to improve communication. First off, make sure when speaking to a hearing impaired individual to not shout. Although shouting increases the pitch and volume of words, it usually does not help a hearing impaired person hear more effectively because the words are still spoken in the same way. This means that those who cannot hear particular consonants, vowels, or blends (such as “ch” or “-ing”) are still be unable to do so. Second, try to avoid speaking slowly and elongating words, as if speaking to a child. This is called “elder speak” and can be degrading to those with hearing difficulties. In addition, speaking this way can confuse the hearing impaired more since words are not spoken as they typically are. Instead, it is better to deepen the tone of voice by projecting from the diaphragm.

More strategies include utilizing the hearing impaired person’s well-functioning senses. For example, if the person can see well obtain their eye contact before beginning conversation. Make sure to be in a well-lit room so the person can read facial cues and make use of hand or other bodily gestures to aid in communication. If the hearing impaired person has good tactile perception, tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm to obtain their attention before speaking. Also, attempt to speak into the ear in which the person has better hearing. Those who are visual learners or talented in the arts may benefit more from written notes or pictures.

When possible, eliminate background noise by turning off the television, closing windows, and avoiding loud, crowded places. Often those with hearing impairment combine sounds from conversation with sounds of the surrounding environment, making it difficult to discern between the two. Another basic strategy is to keep the conversation simple. Repeat exactly what was said instead of rewording it. Rewording can contribute to confusion since it is a different sound pattern than what the person heard the first time. Also, breaking down complex thoughts into short sentences allows the listener more time to understand what is being said; just as it is easier to comprehend a second language if the speaker uses many basic sentences to tell a story. Regardless of the setting, be aware of how words are spoken, making sure to speak and announce clearly. A classic example is the common saying, “Whuddya doin?” When speaking to somebody with hearing difficulties, it is best to articulate each syllable by saying, “What are you doing?”

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