

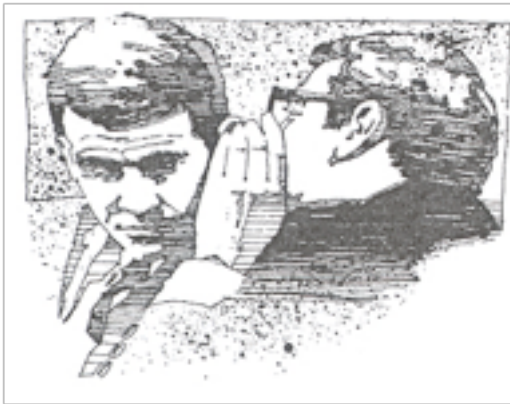
A LINE ON LIFE

9/21/97

"What did you say?" *

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According to the National Institute on Deafness and other Communications Disorders, over 28 million Americans have **impaired hearing**. Of these, about 9 out of 10 are "*hard of hearing*" or partially deaf. The remainder are profoundly deaf and live in a deaf society. They use sign language and have a rich culture of their own.



In contrast, hard-of-hearing people are still trying to live in the "*hearing*" world. They cling to their links with the hearing world, even though they have difficulty understanding its sounds. They begin to feel isolated from the world they know, and they become hesitant to interact with others.

In a 1992 study, psychologists found most hard-of-hearing people to be reluctant to interact with others. For example, they were more likely to ask familiar people than strangers to repeat statements. Rather than rephrasing what they think they heard, hard-of-hearing people merely ask others to repeat what they said.

(Rephrasing statements is a more effective method to

increase understanding of what has been said.) It becomes easier to avoid conversations. Going to the theater, movies or church become unpleasant tasks.

If you have hard-of-hearing people in your family, you cannot avoid dealing with their disability. All too often, hard-of-hearing people become dependent on family members to interpret what others have said. Even so, it is hard for family members to appreciate what is happening.

For example, hearing is an "*emergency sense*." It alerts us to emergencies around us via car horns, sirens and smoke alarms. Even when we go to sleep, we can use sounds to alert us to danger – an object falling, unexpected footsteps, or glass breaking.

When hearing decays, we also experience a strong sense of uneasiness. We lose many of the background sounds that orient us in everyday life – the chirping of crickets, the flutter of a fan, the hum of a refrigerator, the whirr of a computer.

Cultural biases also contribute to the problem. Even though disabilities are currently experiencing greater social acceptance, there is still a strong stigma about having a hearing loss. People with glasses don't experience the stigma of those who wear hearing aids. Partially this is because glasses can return sight to normal, unlike hearing aids. Hearing aids are more likely to be linked with images of aging, inadequacy or incompetency. This is why hearing-aid manufacturers are trying to reduce the size of their products, so they can be more easily concealed.

For those who don't use sign language, hearing is at the heart of most communication. If a comment is not heard, most people are willing to repeat it. However, if this continues to occur, speakers are likely to doubt if the listener can understand at all. They begin to wonder about the listener's intelligence. In contrast, if something cannot be seen, the person displaying it thinks nothing of merely bringing it closer to be viewed better. There is no assumption of stupidity.

Even without this negative assumption, speakers get tired of repeating themselves in social interactions. According to one psychologist, *"People find it easier not to talk to you."*

Hearing loss can lead to denial, depression, anxiety and shame. Anger and isolation can be added to this list, along with low self-esteem and fear of embarrassment. Specifically, when they have trouble hearing what is said, hard-of-hearing people are afraid of coming out with responses that are inappropriate.

If someone close to you is losing their hearing, you will probably notice it before they do. You can help the communication process by facing them when you are speaking to them. That way they can read your facial expressions or your lips. Many hard-of-hearing people lip read without being aware of it. This is suggested by comments like, *"Get that away from your face; I can't hear you,"* or *"When you don't look at me, I can't hear you."*

**If you suspect a hearing problem, get tested.
Once you get a hearing aid, use it.**

Many people never get tested by an audiologist, even though many of these tests are free. When they do and spend hundreds of dollars to get hearing aids, many people still don't wear them. Even though they can improve the quality of life greatly, they are not worn because of the feared stigma or embarrassment.

In hopes of reducing the fears of others, I will admit that I have a hearing loss. Luckily, it is in only one ear. I notice my deficit most when I am trying to listen to a conversation, when there is background noise. I still think I hear well in one-on-one conversations. However, even I still don't wear my hearing aid all the time. It seems to help the most when I am teaching class, so I typically wear it when I teach. (If you see me teaching a class, I'll be glad to show it and discuss impaired hearing with you.) My wife says I speak more softly when I am wearing it.

At rare times, it is an advantage. While trying to get to sleep, sometimes there is a distracting cricket serenading a potential mate. If I decide that I don't want to hear it, I sleep with my normal ear on the pillow. In that position, I can't hear the cricket. However, my wife – when she wants to shut out that sound – doesn't have that option.

* Adapted from Nathan Seppa's "Hard-of hearing clients often hide their disability," [*The APA Monitor*](#), July, 1997, page 28.