



## *What did you say? Hearing loss in later life*

The reason you don't understand me Edith is because I'm talkin' to you in English and you're listening in dingbat!

Archie Bunker, *All In The Family*

Hearing loss can be frustrating, even exasperating, both for the hearing impaired and their loved ones who are trying to communicate with them. It's not unusual for mature couples to fall into the blame game when hearing loss sets in – “you don't listen to a word I say”, or contrarily, “I can't hear you because you mumble all the time.” All too often hearing loss is misinterpreted as cantankerous behavior, a lack of interest, or a lack of intelligence. For people with a hearing loss nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, individuals with hearing loss are sometimes the last to recognize they have a problem.

Part of the reason the real problem is not recognized is that hearing loss among seniors is usually the result of a gradual, age-related reduction in the ability to hear sounds, or *presbycusis*, as it is medically known. In particular, high pitched sounds and consonants such as s, f, and z may be indistinguishable from one another. This lack of clarity explains why some older adults will say, “I hear you, but I can't understand you.” Hearing loss is the third most prevalent chronic condition in the older population. About 54% of people over age 65, and 75% over 75, have significant hearing impairment. Men are more likely than women to suffer hearing loss.

Some of the clues that someone is having hearing problems include: talking louder or softer than normal, asking to have conversations repeated, playing the radio or television at a high volume, misunderstanding conversations or claiming

that certain things were never told to them, and losing interest in going to the movies, out to dinner or other social activities where listening plays a key role. Recent research has shown that seniors suffering hearing loss are also more likely than the general population to feel depressed and isolate themselves.

If you suspect that a loved one is having hearing difficulties, encourage them to make a doctor's appointment to have a preliminary hearing exam and a referral to an audiologist for a more comprehensive hearing evaluation. If a hearing aid is recommended, research carefully all of the options. Although most seniors with hearing loss can benefit from using a hearing aid, two out of three choose not to wear one. Research has shown that many people make this decision based on the belief that hearing aids will not improve their hearing problem. Recent advances in digital technology, however, have vastly improved the quality and distinctions of sound over the standard analog hearing aids, which have a notorious poor sound quality and only amplification adjustments. While digital devices are not cheap -- several thousand dollars compared to a few hundred for the analog model -- they can significantly improve one's ability to hear, and quality of life. According to recent research, those who use hearing aids report significant improvements in many areas of their lives, ranging from family relationships and a new sense of independence to a better social life and sex life.

Experts recommend the following tips for communication with a hearing impaired person:

1. Always face hearing-impaired persons when speaking to them, at a distance of about 3 to 6 feet. This way, they can pick up on facial expressions and gestures (presented in a natural manner) to increase their understanding of your message.
2. Get the person's attention before speaking.
3. Position yourself so that any light shines on your face, and not the listener's.

4. Do not shout, as this distorts the message. Speak slowly in an audible voice, using clear, distinct articulation.
5. Look for clues of misunderstanding, and if necessary, repeat your message using simpler words or shorter phrases. Do not show annoyance if the person does not understand.
6. Be aware that environmental noise (T.V., radios, electrical appliances, cars, etc.) and large-group settings make listening harder for the hearing-impaired.
7. Try to be at the same level with the person. If the listener is in a wheelchair, sit down in a chair to talk so he or she can pick up on visual cues.
8. When walking with a hearing-aid user, stand on the person's hearing-aid side.

For more information on living with hearing loss or communicating with the hearing impaired, contact the following organizations:

**American Speech-Language-Hearing Association**

10801 Rockville Pike  
Rockville, MD 20852  
Toll-free, voice or TTY: 800-638-8255  
[www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)

**Better Hearing Institute**

5021 - B Backlick Rd.  
Annadale VA 22003  
703/642-0580 Voice  
800/ear-well TDD/TT/toll free Hearing Helpline  
<http://www.betterhearing.org/>

**Self Help For Hard Of Hearing People**

7800 Wisconsin Avenue  
Bethesda MD 20814  
301/657-2248 voice

301/657-2249 TDD  
<http://www.shhh.org>

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