

Age-Related Hearing Loss (Presbycusis)

There are many afflictions plaguing the elderly that go unnoticed by unaffected friends and associates. On the other hand, a visible impairment such as a bent spine, a limp, loose false teeth, or rheumatoid arthritis seldom goes unnoticed and generally evokes some sort of deferential behavior. Hearing loss falls into the former category. Those so afflicted can expect no special accommodation unless they are forward enough to ask for it. Most would rather quietly endure the malady rather than appear somehow selfish or in need of special attention. Hopefully, this writing will help to correct this situation.

The specific causes and effects of each case of hearing loss are varied. Some sufferers may hear well but only in one ear. These individuals always wish to be seated according to their favorable hearing side. Individual listeners are allowed to feel honored when one of those one-eared individuals moves to your other side in order to hear you better.

The general list of causes of hearing loss is loud noises, heredity, head injury, infection, illness, certain prescription drugs, and circulatory problems such as high blood pressure.

The most common cause in this author's octogenarian age group is called presbycusis, pronounced: pres-by·cu·sis. The word covers age-related changes in the ear or auditory nerve. Having presbycusis may make it hard for a person to tolerate loud sounds or to interpret what others are saying. They may hear you, but they cannot understand you, which might begs the question; who's the stupid one?

In solitary situations, those affected by hearing loss can most often enhance their hearing sense satisfactorily by turning up the volume on the TV, phone, or hearing aids. It's in group situations where those solutions do not always work. It is difficult, sometimes impossible, for the presbycusis sufferer to separate a specific voice or conversation when multiple sources of sound are present. Simply turning up the electronic hearing aid does not work. Presbycusis sufferers will tell you that hearing aids only amplify noise. They do nothing to differentiate between the noises. Using a crutch or a cane is not a solution; they are merely aids. Likewise, hearing aids are also not a solution; they are just aids.

The hearing aid industry has worked very hard to make hearing aids invisible. This may be a mistake. Anyone reading this would automatically extend courtesy to someone in a wheelchair, using a cane, wearing a visible prosthesis, or otherwise exhibiting a disability. Except for shouting in the face of someone who no longer hears well, hearing loss sufferers get no accommodation. I sometimes think it would be a good idea to wear a sign announcing "Hearing impaired" on a neck lanyard.

Like any other disability, loss of hearing is aggravating and frustrating and not the fault of anyone. Unfortunately, the hearing impaired do not always endure the ailment quietly. I have seen associates with presbycusis in group situations rip their hearing aids from their ears, throw them down in disgust and walk away from the group. The cause is frequently competing noise, raucous behavior, or loud discourse.

So, what can one do to help the hearing impaired? Here are a few suggestions: If you are leading a group, ask if there are hearing impaired present and if special accommodation would improve their chances of participating more beneficially. When you are speaking in a group, try to be in a position where everyone can see you clearly. Visual cues are very helpful to the hearing impaired; stand up when you speak or at least do not read your speech into your lap. Speak slowly, and enunciate clearly. Pause if another noise, like a truck passing, competes with you.

If you yourself are hearing impaired, do not be afraid to announce that fact. Give your associates a chance to accommodate your impairment. It costs them nothing to do so, and everyone will be happier all around.

Posted by Dave Bareiss, March 31, 2023.

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