

## Hearing Loss, Stress, and Coping: It's a Family Affair

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By definition, the give-and-take of communication assumes everyone can follow and contribute to a conversation. When a family member has a hearing problem, the entire family often experiences frustration because the usual give-and-take is not working. The person with impaired hearing misses some conversation and is too embarrassed to let others know, or assumes the conversation was heard correctly, only to respond incorrectly. On the other end, family members often tire of repeating themselves, or wonder if they were misunderstood, or even believe the person with hearing loss is not really trying (“she only hears what she wants to hear”).



These communication breakdowns create stress. Until we live with hearing loss, we don't realize how stressful family life can be when communication is not easy. This article will describe three kinds of stress associated with hearing loss in the family, and also three coping strategies that can help reduce this stress.

### **Hearing Loss and Stress:**

Individuals with hearing loss live with these stressors:

- The stress of “listening effort”

When hearing problems develop, voices and the sounds around us become distorted or too soft to understand. We need to use additional concentration to make sense of it, and often it takes more effort than we realize. Most family members are unaware of the stress associated to listening with impaired hearing; indeed, many people with hearing loss do not realize the toll this effort takes on them.

- The stress of a changing self-concept

When hearing starts to change, we often don't even realize it. We are likely to assume other people are not speaking clearly, or that the telephone signal has some interference. When we start to realize the problem is our hearing, it can be upsetting. We'd rather not associate ourselves with a health problem. We'd rather define ourselves in positive terms, to reflect the successes we have achieved in life. It may not be easy to say about ourselves, "I am a person with a hearing problem."

- Stress from society reactions

The stressors described above can be called "internal stressors." Listening effort and self-concept come from within; an additional (external) stressor might come from our community. Our neighbors and colleagues may express negative attitudes about hearing problems or hearing help, or bias based on old stereotypes. Our natural preference is not to deviate too far from the "community norm," so we may unwittingly give a great deal of weight to society reactions. Worrying about what other people think can add yet more stress to our lives.

## **Hearing Loss and Coping Strategies**

Once we understand our stressors, we are in a better position to deal with them. Here are three coping strategies often used by persons with hearing loss. It can help the entire family to understand these:

- Vigilance

Vigilance is the act of maintaining high levels of physical and mental energy needed to listen (that is, to sustain "listening effort"). To appreciate the challenge, it helps to remember that "listening" refers to how we detect, process, and respond rapidly to unpredictable or hard-to-perceive auditory input. Another way to think about it is trying to listen with "110% effort." It is effective, but this heightened attention is exhausting!



- Respite

One cannot function at the “vigilance” level indefinitely. “Down time” or “respite” is absolutely necessary. Respite describes a temporary withdrawal in order to conserve and regain energy (often called “recharging one’s batteries”). For much-needed respite, persons with hearing loss might retreat from family conversation to read or nap. Although a positive mental health choice, respite is often misunderstood by loved ones. When family members complain that “he only hears what he wants to hear,” they indicate they are not yet aware of the effort involved with listening, and the need *not* to listen all the time. [Click here for a handout describing the concepts of vigilance and respite designed for family members \(RxForFamilies.doc\).](#)

- Reframing

This last coping strategy is addressed to patients who are ready to hear better, and decide to use amplification. Research shows that new hearing aid users go through an adjustment process (for instance, the world sounds different; it feels different to wear hearing instruments). Because it’s not expected, you may be tempted to abandon the idea altogether. But here’s a word of encouragement: research (and our experience) also shows that *the adjustment process is temporary*. Reframing the experience from a negative perception to “it’s all part of the normal learning curve” will help you focus on long-term improvement and avoid discouragement. [Click here for a handout summarizing these points to remind yourself of the temporary nature of this adjustment process \(RxForHAUser.doc\)](#)

## **Conclusion**

Family communication is such an integral part of our everyday lives, it sometimes takes awhile to figure out what is going on when a problem arises. If the problem is hearing loss, the solutions include family support, technology, and some psychology: in this case, recognizing the stress hearing loss can cause, and learning how to cope with that stress. Millions of people in the US are working on this type of “self-improvement project” right now!