



Improving Communication with Seniors Who Have Hearing Loss

By Laurie Orlov

Age remains the strongest predictor for hearing loss.¹ Improving the ability to communicate with aging adults is a critical component to enhancing better health outcomes – thereby improving quality of life and even reducing costs of care.

When it comes to effectively communicating with seniors with hearing loss, there are a few things to consider. Do caretakers and family members understand hearing loss and its myriad impacts? Do they have the right toolkit of communication approaches? Do they use these skills to ensure that seniors with hearing loss are treated with respect and are engaged as much as possible in their day-to-day lives? Here are nine tips for anyone engaging with seniors who have hearing loss to use when communicating with them.

9 Tips to Improve Communication with Seniors Who Have Hearing Loss²

1

Get Their Attention

Respectfully get the senior's attention before speaking. Polite ways to do so include stepping into their line of sight, calmly waving a hand in their direction or lightly tapping on their shoulder. Try not to startle the person though.



Reduce Background Noise

Eliminate as much background noise as possible, including music, television sounds and other people's conversations. Choosing quieter locations can help minimize ambient noise and distractions while better facilitating communication.

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Speak One at a Time

Conversations with multiple people can be challenging to follow for someone with hearing loss. In a group setting, such as a senior living community, try to make sure only one person talks at a time. Side conversations and talking over one another can make it confusing and overwhelming for someone with hearing loss.



Speak Clearly and Loudly

Face the person and enunciate while speaking, but don't exaggerate your speech. The same applies to the tone and volume of your voice. Some seniors with age-related hearing loss benefit when a speaker uses a slightly raised voice but doesn't shout. Be mindful to speak at a reasonable speed as well – not too fast but not too slow either.

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Repeat Yourself

When conversing with someone who has hearing loss, it's important to remember they may not fully comprehend what you've said on the first try. If they seem confused, don't hesitate to ask if they've understood. Try repeating, using the exact same words and phrasing a couple of times. Exact repetition may help them piece together the entire thought you're expressing, whereas constantly changing what you're saying can be counterproductive and may make them doubt what they thought you said initially.



Rephrase Your Question or Statement, if Necessary

6

Did Mark call you this week?

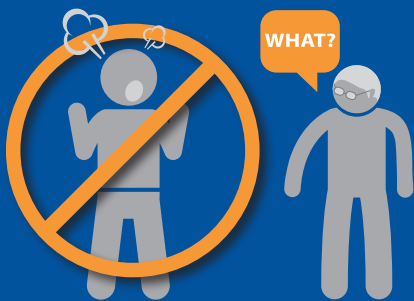
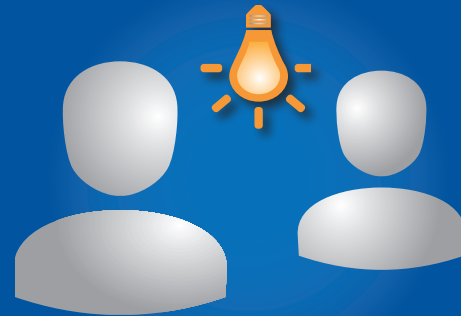
Have you talked to Mark?

If repetition isn't serving either of you well, then take a shot at rephrasing what you're trying to convey. Try shortening and simplifying your question or statement and see if that helps.

7

Appearances and Visual Cues Matter

Proper lighting and visibility can help seniors with hearing loss use visual cues to better understand what is being said to them. Be sure to face the person directly while speaking and try to maintain normal eye contact. Even if they never studied lip-reading, a great deal of information can be gained by looking at the speaker's mouth, facial expressions and body language. Avoid obstructing the view of your mouth, looking around, and eating or chewing gum while conversing since this can interfere with the ability to hear or interpret what you're saying. Sometimes gestures can help get an idea across – remember to be respectful.



Be Understanding

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Always exercise patience when conversing with someone who has hearing loss. If you get frustrated, take a deep breath and consider how difficult the situation may be for them. As much as you want the person with hearing loss to hear what you have to say, remember they also want to be able to listen, understand and participate in this exchange. Misunderstandings and awkward moments are bound to happen but try to keep things light and continue the interaction.

9

Ask How They Prefer to Communicate

Coping with hearing loss is often a cooperative effort. There are many different types and degrees of hearing loss. Each person has their preferred means of effectively communicating, so don't hesitate to ask the person how you can help improve your interaction. If verbal communication is not successful, switch your approach. Try writing down what you want to say, using respectful gestures, or typing out your question or statement on your phone and showing it to the person.





As with other skills developed while communicating with seniors with hearing loss, these tactics should be refreshed periodically.

Considering the ubiquity of hearing loss among the aging population, the benefits of better communication with seniors who have hearing loss cannot be understated. Employing these skills will lead to a better understanding of any needs or health issues seniors with hearing loss may have while also building a better environment of trust and support for all stakeholders engaged in their care – family, friends and healthcare professionals alike.



About the Author

Laurie M. Orlov, a tech industry veteran, writer and speaker is the founder of **Aging and Health Technology Watch**, providing thought leadership, analysis and guidance. Laurie spent many years in the technology industry, first as a CIO and then at the analyst firm Forrester Research.

¹“Quick Statistics About Hearing, Balance, & Dizziness,” National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, March, 2024
nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick-statistics-hearing

²“How to Communicate with Hearing Impaired Elderly Loved Ones,” *AgingCare*, 2023
agingcare.com/articles/hearing-loss-communication-techniques-144762.htm