

Tips for Improving your Listening Experience

by M. Samantha Lewis, Ph.D., CCC-A and Gabrielle H. Saunders, Ph.D.

National Center for Rehabilitative Auditory Research
Portland VA Medical Center
Portland, OR

Many people with hearing impairment believe that the communication problems they encounter are solely a result of their hearing loss. This is not the case. There are many other factors that also can cause a breakdown in communication, such as the particular talker, the listening environment, the content of the message and other listener variables. There are ways, known as “communication strategies” that can be used to avoid or fix such breakdowns. Some of these strategies can be used to make communication easier at the outset (facilitative strategies), while others can be used to fix a communication breakdown that has already occurred (repair strategies).

Some examples of facilitative strategies:

- Tell people you have a hearing loss.
- Ask the talker to get your attention before they begin speaking and to alert you to a change in conversation topic.
- When possible, find a quiet, well-lit room for communication.
- If possible, stand or sit between 3 and 6 feet from the talker. This is the optimal distance for seeing clearly the talker’s face and lips.

Some examples of repair strategies:

- Provide talkers with feedback about the problems you are having, i.e. ask them to speak more slowly, to raise their voice, or to face you. Simply saying ‘huh?’ or ‘pardon?’ is not effective.
- Ask talkers to rephrase or to simplify what they said.
- Ask talkers to repeat only the parts of the sentence that you did not hear so that they can emphasize that content.
- Do not pretend to hear when you did not! This increases misunderstandings and can result in embarrassment for all.
- Ask talkers to confirm what you heard, e.g. ‘Am I correct that you said xxxx?’
- Ask talkers to write down important information such as addresses, phone numbers and appointment times.

In addition, there are some more specific strategies you can use when particular problems arise. Below are some examples of particular communication problems and some strategies you can use to improve communication.

(a) Talker Variables

Problem: The speaker is difficult to understand.

Solutions:

- ✓ Ask talkers to speak more slowly and to raise or lower their voice as appropriate.
- ✓ Ask talkers to look directly at you and not to cover their face so that you can clearly see their lips and expressions.

Notes: Many people assume shouting at someone with a hearing loss will help them but in fact it just distorts their voice and makes understanding more difficult.

Talkers like to hear positive as well as negative feedback so tell them when they are speaking at the right rate or loudness.

(b) Environmental Variables

Problem: Background noise.

Solutions:

- ✓ Suggest moving to a quieter location, deliberately select a quiet meeting place, or go out to eat at a less busy time so that the restaurant will be less noisy.
- ✓ Try to sit with the noise behind you and have the talker sit directly in front of you so you can use information from their lips and expressions.
- ✓ Turn off or move away from noise sources such as radios, televisions, dishwashers etc.

Notes: There are now many restaurant reviews that provide information on noise levels. Make use of these when choosing a restaurant.

Problem: Room lighting.

Solutions:

- ✓ Make sure the room is well lit and that the talker is not sitting in front of a window (this makes it difficult to see their face).

Notes: Research has shown that using lip reading and facial expressions can increase understanding of speech up to 20% even in individuals with no formal lipreading training

Problem: Room acoustics.

Solutions:

- ✓ Select floor and window coverings that absorb sounds, such as heavy carpets and heavy cloth for your home. These decrease reverberation (echoes) in the room and make hearing easier.
- ✓ Avoid restaurants that have hard floors and bare walls for the same reasons.

(c) Message Variables

Problem: You are unfamiliar with the topic of conversation, or the content is unexpected

Solutions:

- ✓ Ask a friend to summarize the topic of conversation for you and to alert you when the topic changes.
- ✓ Phrase your questions so as to limit the reply, e.g. ask a yes/no question.
- ✓ If possible prepare for the conversation/meeting ahead of time by anticipating potential content and vocabulary that will be used.

(d) Listener Variables (aside from hearing loss)

Problem: Attention level, fatigue, stress, distractions, etc.

Solutions:

- ✓ Set yourself realistic goals.
- ✓ Ask to have short breaks in meetings to prevent fatigue.

Many audiology clinics throughout the United States offer formal communication training. This training is designed to make you more aware of some of the issues summarized above and help

you to improve your listening and speech reading skills. Such training programs have been shown to significantly improve communication and quality of life.