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## Help for the hard of hearing

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Above all, be patient if you're a relative or friend of someone with hearing loss. ©

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Hearing loss is often an underrated problem - at least to those who don't have it. People with normal hearing may view it as more of an inconvenience than a disability. But being hard of hearing can have a profound impact. It's hard to enjoy conversations when you're always straining to keep up with what's said. Some with hearing loss simply withdraw or avoid social contact to prevent the stress and frustration.

Being hearing-impaired can make you depressed, angry and even paranoid and suspicious when you don't hear what others are saying. Loss of self-esteem may follow.

The problem is especially common among seniors. Today, one in three people over age 60 and half of those over age 75 suffer hearing loss. Many of them tend to deny or underestimate the negative fallout, but this can make the impact worse.

Studies show that people who don't seek help for severe hearing loss are likely to have a lower quality of life. This included those in the study who often tried to cover up their disability by pretending to hear, guessing what was said or avoiding interactions.

### Tips for the hard of hearing

Hearing loss doesn't have to be devastating. First, talk to your doctor about your condition and possible treatments. But even if there are no treatment options that are right for you, there are other ways you can help yourself. Try these strategies to improve communication:

1. Let others know you have hearing loss. Instead of hiding it, tell people how they can help. Should they speak louder, slower or closer to your better ear?
2. Use nonverbal communication skills. Ask people to face you when they talk so you can see their faces and how their body is moving. Stand in good lighting when conversing, especially if you lip-read.
3. Get away from background noise. Turn off the TV, move to a quieter room, don't sit near speakers.
4. Ask people to write down a few words if you're having trouble understanding.
5. Look into using assistive listening devices, such as personal amplifiers.
6. Take lessons in how to lip-read or speech-read. Ask your doctor or audiologist for a referral.

### **How family and friends can help**

Above all, be patient if you're a relative or friend of someone with hearing loss. Even a hearing aid doesn't restore the person's hearing to normal. Try these ways of making yourself easier to understand.

1. Get the person's attention before you start talking. Talk into the person's better ear if that's a factor, too.
2. Speak slowly and clearly and face the person. Don't shout, because that distorts your lip movements and makes it harder for someone to lip-read.
3. Use facial expressions, gestures and body language when talking. Your hands shouldn't ever cover your lips or face.
4. Position yourself so the light is on your face and not coming from behind.
5. If you're a man with a mustache or beard, shave it off or trim it. It's easier to read lips not covered by hair.
6. Watch for any misunderstanding. If the person's reply doesn't make sense, repeat what you said with different words. Or ask the person to repeat what he or she heard to make sure the right message was received.
7. Encourage the hearing-impaired person to talk to a doctor or audiologist for possible treatment if he or she hasn't.

If you are the one with the hearing problem, don't be reluctant or embarrassed to acknowledge it. Working together with family, friends and caregivers is key in making sure that hearing loss doesn't get in the way of your enjoying life.

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