

How to Talk to Your Family About Hearing Loss

By Shari Eberts

When someone in the family has hearing loss, the whole family is impacted. Getting everyone on the same page can help enhance communication and make hearing loss much less frustrating and difficult for all. As the person with hearing loss, it is your responsibility to allow your family to share your unique journey. Here are some tips to do just that.

1. Tell them about your hearing loss. Your immediate family is usually the first to know, but your extended family may not be aware that you have trouble hearing. Be upfront and open about your struggles to allow others to provide the help you need. This may also help explain any mishearings or non-sequiturs that occur.

2. Explain what your hearing loss is like. Hearing loss is difficult to understand for people who have not experienced it, so you may need to explain your hearing loss several times and in a variety of settings to give them a full picture. Suggest that your family members wear earplugs in a safe setting for them to experience what it's like to have hearing difficulties. This won't be fully accurate since earplugs don't mimic the distortion that comes with hearing loss, but it may give them an idea of your condition.

3. Bring them to your audiologist appointment. Learning about your audiogram and the severity of your hearing loss from an expert may help them understand the seriousness of the challenges you face. Your family can also help your audiologist get a better sense of the communication situations that are the most challenging for you, which will aid in your treatment.

4. Share your emotions about your hearing loss. While it is tempting to keep a stiff upper lip, the more you share the frustrations and sadness that surround your hearing loss, the closer your relationships with your family will be. Vulnerability is the path to true partnership.

5. Break down the stigma. If you are comfortable with your hearing issues, others will be too. When I was growing up, my father had hearing loss but would not discuss it. This made hearing loss an unmentionable topic in the family and prevented us from assisting him when he needed it. Make your hearing loss a normal part of the family dynamic.

6. Teach them communication best practices. Small things like getting a person's attention before speaking, keeping



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your mouth uncovered, and always facing the person with hearing loss when you speak can go a long way toward improving communication. Educate family members about what they need to do to help you hear your best. Be as specific as possible so they can better understand your needs and don't resort to yelling or leaning into your ear to talk.

7. Invite them to your self-advocacy efforts. When your family collects the caption reader at the movies for you or asks the restaurant manager to lower the music volume, you feel their strong support. These gestures also help you conserve energy for the additional self-advocacy battles that likely lie ahead. Involve your family in activities and volunteer events with your hearing loss community. The more they learn about hearing loss, the better they can understand and support you in your challenges.

8. Create a visual signal for when you didn't hear something. Visual signals can be just as effective as asking "What?" and won't interrupt the flow of the conversation. They can also limit the frustration on both sides when you repeatedly ask someone to speak louder.

9. Experiment with new technologies. Ask your family to help you test new assistive listening devices to see if they make conversation easier when you're dining out or in other settings with background noise. This can be a fun adventure, especially with kids who tend to be more tech-savvy.

10. Bring your sense of humor. Mishearings will occur, so don't take them too seriously. Some can be very funny if you let them be. Keeping a light-hearted attitude can go a long way toward building family support.

Involving your family in your hearing loss journey will help you develop a strong support network where you need it most. Being honest, asking for specific assistance, and enlisting them in your self-advocacy efforts will help strengthen your relationships and enhance communication.



Ms. Eberts is a hearing health advocate, writer, and avid Bikram yogi. She is the founder of *Living With Hearing Loss*, a blog and online community for people living with hearing loss and tinnitus. She also serves on the Board of Trustees of the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA). She has adult-onset genetic hearing loss, and hopes that by sharing her story she will help others live more peacefully with their own hearing issues.