

Secondary Disabilities: The Vicious Circle (How One Impairment Can Cause Another)



A Round-Table Presentation and Discussion

Session UID 5U: Willing and Able: How Technical Communicators with Disabilities Can Succeed in their Profession

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Today's Agenda

- Introduction of Presenters
- Definition of Secondary Disabilities
- Examples of Secondary Disabilities
- Detailed Case History (Hearing Loss and “Tune-Out”)
- Breaking the Vicious Circle
- Questions and Answers, Discussion, Handouts



Meet the Presenters

- Lori Gillen
- Ria Voss
- Dan Voss



What is a Secondary Disability?

A secondary disability is a self-imposed additional limitation or an exacerbation of a primary physical, cognitive, or psychological disability caused by experiences relating to the primary disability.



A Secondary Disability Can Lead to ...

- A perception of a greater primary disability than is actually the case
- Unnecessary/irrational lifestyle changes
- Intermittent depression and even total surrender

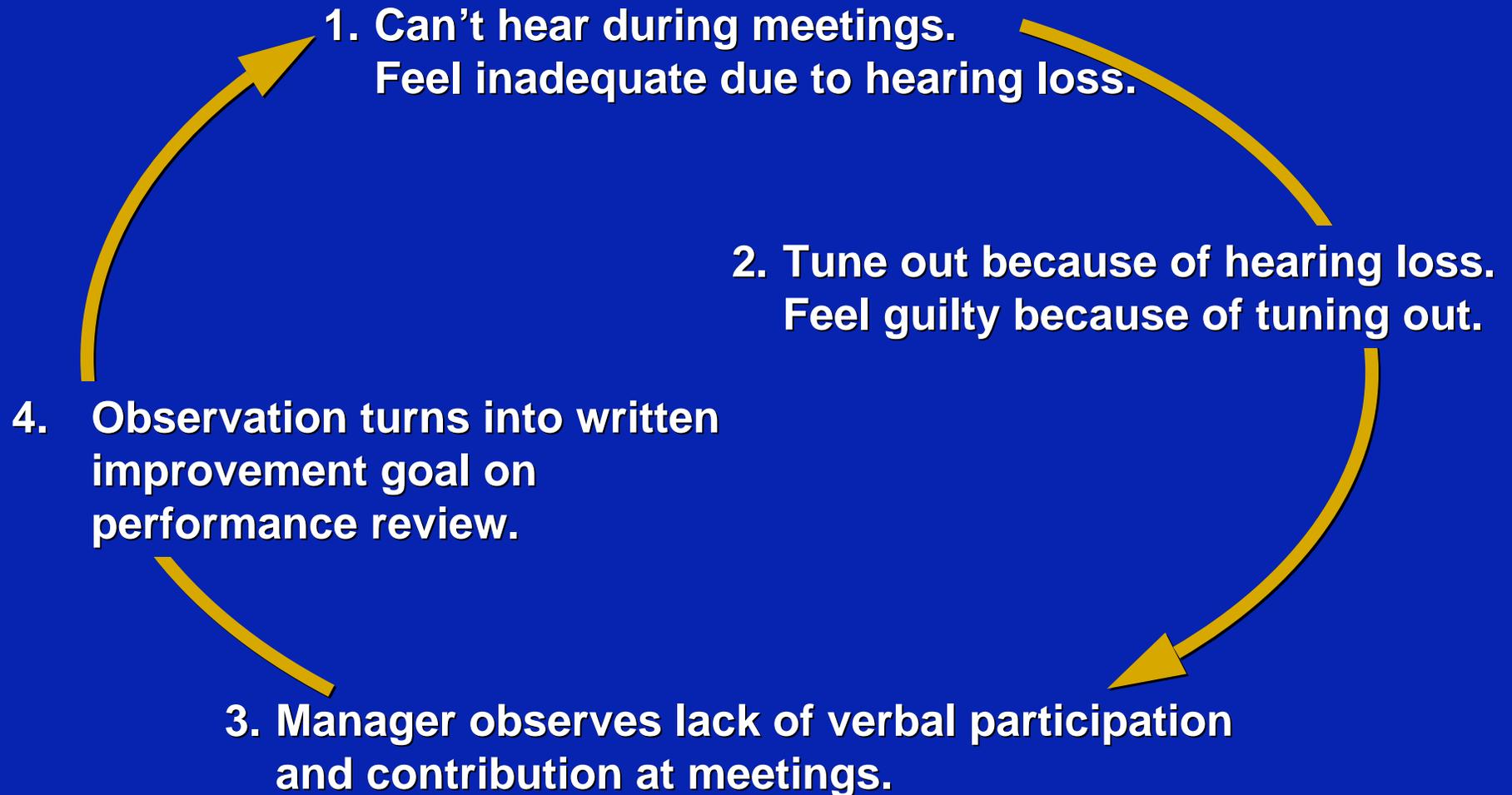


Examples of Secondary Disabilities

Primary Disability	Secondary Disability
Hearing loss	Losing the ability to pay attention
Fibromyalgia	Cognitive processing (beyond dysfunction caused as a primary symptom of fibromyalgia)
Pain and mobility restrictions	Fear of commitment to projects
Attention deficit disorder (ADD)	Losing ability to focus



A Vicious Circle at Work





First Attempt at Solving the Problem

First step: Went to audiologist to have hearing tested

Next step: Obtained hearing aid that improved hearing by approximately 30%--greatly reducing the deficit

Result at work: Still not contributing to meetings

New problem: Hearing OK but still tuning out

Conclusion: Secondary disability in operation that must be addressed



Why the “Tune-Out”

“Think about what would happen if I were standing here talking all this time to you in Russian ... what would you be doing? Would you be sitting there straining to understand what I was saying? No.

After about a minute and a half, you would be gone. You would be doing your bills in your head. You would be thinking about your date next week or last week.

That’s what happens to people who don’t hear well in situations where it’s very difficult to understand. The most normal and natural thing to do is space out.

The problem is that you can do this for so long that you stop attending altogether. **You lose the ability to focus attention on what is being said,** and attention training may be necessary.” --Sam Trychin, Ph.D.

Note: Sam Trychin, who has a Ph.D. in psychology, has had a hearing loss since his military service.





Second Attempt at Solving the Problem

First step: Obtained hearing aid, but problem persisted despite substantial hearing gains due to failure to address secondary disability

Next step: Treated the secondary disability this time. Implemented Trychin's suggestion of retraining in attention by having someone read sentences and then repeat them

Adaptive measures at work: Took boss's suggestion to become the scribe for meeting minutes, forcing increased attention and participation

Supportive environment: Coworkers helped fill in any gaps caused by residual hearing loss

Outcome: Met improvement goal on performance review!



Blasting a Hole in the Vicious Circle

1. Secure optimum medical intervention to minimize limitations (surgery, medication, etc.)
2. Maximize technological accommodations for any remaining deficit after #1 has been exhausted
3. Recognize the possibility of a secondary disability and seek psychological intervention to interrupt and reverse a possible negative spiral



Psychological Intervention

- Recognizing and controlling our feelings
- Identifying and neutralizing our fears
- Counseling ... accepting reality
- Stress management and relaxation therapy