

What you Can't Hear *Can* Hurt You: Overcoming Physical and Emotional Barriers of Hearing Impairment in the Practice of Technical Communication

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Children who fail hearing tests but who function in educational settings are assumed to have only unimportant handicaps. These children learn to live with their problems, but a significant hearing impairment diminishes the information such children receive. Help is available for children, but also for adults who have not fully recognized their handicaps. This paper describes the problems of people with moderate hearing loss, and provides information on what can be done to ameliorate their problems.

It wasn't until last year that I came to realize why people were always bumping into me. I just assumed that people were setting me up so that they could all have a good laugh at my expense.

Then last year, as if my fairy godmother sprinkled some "wake up" dust on me, it became remarkably clear that people were not getting in my way. I was getting in their way, because I am hard of hearing and I could not sense people approaching me. Now, whenever I come to a blind corner, I step out cautiously and make sure that no one is there before I continue on my way.

The story that I mentioned above briefly explains the journey of my life with a hearing loss and how I came to terms with it. For so many years my disability went unrecognized, so I treated it as a psychological problem. But, then as I learned to recognize my problem I was able to become productive in helping myself.

Most children in most school systems are given hearing tests in elementary school. Students who do not pass the test are pulled aside for further testing. Often, further tests establish a level of hearing that the schools deem as adequate for educational purposes. Just like the sight tests, if correction is deemed advisable, a letter is sent to the parents but often there is no follow-up treatment because the child is deemed not to have a serious problem. With children in our society, eyeglasses are common but hearing aids are rare. If a child with a mild hearing loss is not provided with an assistive hearing device, that child may be functioning at less than his or her capability. If the child is smart, the problem may go undetected. So, while children's vision problems are usually aggressively dealt with, hearing problems often go unresolved.

Children with undetected hearing loss first learn to live with the problem and then learn to pretend that the

problem doesn't exist. This attitude causes these children to face many serious repercussions. The most obvious ones are issues with academic performance. Less obvious are the psychological repercussions. These children know that there is something wrong, but do not necessarily know that it is their hearing that is the problem, and they may not know how to ask for the help that they need. Children with undetected hearing impairments are always on the periphery of normal life because they cannot participate in regular conversations, especially if someone speaks in a soft voice. They can never be the recipient of secrets, because they can never hear anything that is whispered in their ears. They tune out at family gatherings, and later in business meetings, because there is too much distraction to focus on the conversations. But they may not necessarily understand that the problem is related to their hearing. They may just mistakenly think that people are avoiding them or exasperated with them for having to talk louder. Some hearing-impaired people become filled with shame and embarrassment over who they are. When they approach people they are almost certain that they will not be liked and accepted but will end up on the outside looking in.

Children who have learned to put their problem aside may have trouble figuring out what kind of help they need. It won't be obvious to them that they need auditory help. They may think that they need psychological help because they are only in touch with the emotions that they are facing not the actual problem. As children get older they may pursue different psychological and religious routes in order to gain comfort with their inability to fit into their world. But, they will never be able to get help for their emotions until they recognize that they do in fact have a physical problem. Recognition helps them to accept that they have a disability, and acceptance enables them to deal with the issue in a productive manner.

How then do people get help when they don't even recognize that they need help? Moving from a point of confusion to one of awareness is not the same journey for everyone. My personal transition began three years ago when I asked a human resources person at my place of employment if our company would pay for an amplifier for my telephone. She asked me if I had trouble hearing in other work situations. I told her that I had trouble hearing conference calls, I had trouble hearing in meetings, and I was concerned that I was not receiving information for my job accurately. To my good fortune, this woman once worked with the hearing-impaired and she was able to help me. She was the first

person who told me that it was OK to ask for help — to ask people to speak up at meetings, to ask a volunteer to take notes for me during classroom training, and to review information to make sure that I heard what was said correctly. My transition was possible because I was able to communicate my problem out loud and as a result I was able to find solutions.

Now I am aware of many resources to help improve the quality of my work and my life. Some of these resources include:

Support Groups. In a support group, such as Self Help for the Hard of Hearing (SHHH), hearing-impaired people can seek the comfort of other people who understand their emotions, and they may also learn to recognize the seriousness of their problem and how much the problem is effecting their lives.

Hearing aids. Hearing aids are worn behind the ear or in the ear. They provide amplification to sounds so that they become audible to hearing-impaired people. Digital technology breaks down sounds so that users can receive amplification only on their areas of limitation.

Telephone devices. Telephone amplifiers make incoming telephone signals louder to hearing-impaired people. Several types of telephone devices exist, such as portable strap-on devices, amplified headsets, and auxiliary amplifiers with volume control. Also, some hearing aids can be amplified for use with the telephone.

Assistive listening devices. An assistive listening device provides personal amplification for individuals in classrooms and small group meetings. The speaker wears a compact transmitter with a microphone and the listener wears a portable receiver with a headphone.

Video Conferencing. Video conferencing is the process of conducting a conference between two or more participants at different sites using computer networks to transmit audio and video data. For the hearing-impaired, video conferencing is highly preferred to simple conference calls because of the visual cues that video conferencing provides.

Computer Aided Real-time Translation (CART). CART provides real-time captioning for large meetings. A court reporter uses a stenotype machine, a phonetic keyboard, and special software to translate the phonetic symbols into English captions almost immediately. The captioning can be broadcast on a screen behind the speaker.

When a hearing-impaired person becomes aware of the support and the resources that are available, that person becomes increasingly more in touch with the problem and what is needed for functioning optimally in the world. This empowerment further enables them to

instruct people in their workplace and other areas of life on how they can help.

In my own work situation, co-workers now check to make sure I can hear them. They help me by taking notes during conference calls, and are patient with me when I cannot follow the thread of a conversation. People no longer look at me funny when I attend classroom training and I stake out the best position in the room for reading the speaker's lips and visual cues. Co-workers understand my preference for email over the telephone. Email has been an extremely useful tool for enabling me to communicate with people accurately in near real time.

The most important lesson I've learned in my own self-discovery with a disability is that I've come to realize that people who once appeared exasperated for having to talk louder to me were only doing so because they did not know how to help. And I did not know how to ask for it.

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