

Hearing Loss is Not Just About Me

By Cathy Kooser



I used to think I was the only one impacted by my hearing loss, I was the only one in pain; however, I was wrong. I was so focused on my own struggles with communicating it never occurred to me to consider my loved ones. I've come to realize many of those around me struggle emotionally with my inability to hear and appropriately respond or participate. The truth is they experience many of the same emotions I do, in particular frustration, anger, and sadness. They may also feel lonely, isolated and even unloved.

I believe life is all about relationships and learning how to give and receive love, but let's face it—relationships are hard! Even under the best of circumstances relationships take a lot of hard work, time, and commitment. Certainly effective communication is a critical component in relationships in order to understand and be understood. One of the single greatest needs any human being has is the need to be understood. Hearing loss can significantly compromise the ability to communicate effectively; therefore feeling misunderstood, rather than understood is often the outcome. A lack of communication and/or a breakdown in communication may come with a heavy price to pay relationship-wise.

Maladaptive Coping Strategies

It's been my experience frequent misunderstandings occur and inaccurate and negative perceptions are often formed about me, by those around me. How and why does this happen? Because my hearing loss was very slow and gradual I began to use maladaptive coping strategies without realizing it was a way to compensate when I didn't understand. While I don't recommend them, there are three primary coping strategies I've adopted and I'll bet if you examine your own coping behavior, you'll find yourself using these strategies too!

“ My hearing loss is not just about me. Everyone around me is deeply impacted by my inability to hear—especially those who are closest to me. It's imperative I understand how my family interprets my coping strategies. ”

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Bluffing

The first strategy I use is bluffing. I use bluffing a lot—you know, when I smile and nod and shake my head that I understand; and I don't have a clue. Sometimes I just get tired of having to ask people to repeat or I'm afraid I'll make them angry if I do. I usually ask for repetition twice, but if I still don't understand, I bluff.

Oh my goodness, have I ever put my foot in my mouth using this strategy. I can't tell you how many times my children have told me "mom I told you..." and I had no knowledge of the matter. I've also made numerous mistakes because I bluffed, rather than owning up to the truth and my lack of understanding. When I really think about it, I realize bluffing is not honest. I lead people to believe I know exactly what they're saying when I don't. Trust, an element that is absolutely crucial to loving relationships, can be broken down and lost when bluffing is a consistent strategy used; as trust is maintained in part, through honest communication.

Dominating the Conversation

The second maladaptive strategy I use is dominating the conversation. If I'm talking all the time, I'm in control of the situation and I know exactly what's being said. I'll never forget when my sweetheart recently told me I dominate on the phone. I was shocked! After pondering his statement I realized he was right. I can't see his face; therefore I don't know he has something to say, so I jump in to fill the silence. I mean after all, there's not supposed to be silence on the phone.

I know the tendency to dominate can be interpreted as disrespectful, aggressive, controlling, domineering and self-centered behavior. I'm sure I've been perceived as a "know it all." When I dominate, I lose out on the opportunity to learn and the relationship really is no relationship at all, as

it's very one-sided. Personally I tend to avoid people who dominate—how about you?

Withdrawal

The third maladaptive strategy I've used and I believe the one most devastating of all, is my tendency to withdraw. Of course I can withdraw in a room full of people. I often withdraw at family gatherings. How do I withdraw, by staying busy—cooking, doing dishes, cleaning up, etc. My daughter once asked me, "Mom, why don't you just sit down with us and enjoy this time with your children and grandchildren?" Well, I want to, but it's hard. Two close family members mumble, my grandchildren are young and very difficult to understand and then of course there's the noise factor. You get the idea.

But honestly, what is their interpretation of my withdrawal? What if it makes them feel as if they are not important to me, that I'm angry with them or worse yet, I don't love them? Please hear me, (no pun intended), when we withdraw there is no relationship, but rather isolation for us and them. I ask you, is it fair to impose isolation on them? Consider also the loss of opportunity to teach and be taught. Our children and grandchildren need us and the wisdom we can invest in their lives. Not to mention, you've heard it said, our children and grandchildren are often our greatest teachers! Most importantly of all, the opportunity is lost to give and receive love. Love truly is what makes the world go around and

certainly is the most vital ingredient in any familial relationship!

My daughter had a baby last fall. I was in the hospital room with her and her husband, my son and his wife. Everyone was happy, chatting and celebrating the life of our new family member. I didn't understand a word they were saying, in spite of attempts at effective communication. I later told my sweetheart, "I'll be so glad when I go to heaven and I can hear every word spoken." While I had not withdrawn, I certainly felt isolated and apart from my family and the celebration that was taking place. I was deeply saddened. Had I shared my lack of understanding with them, I'm sure they would have been deeply saddened too.

More Communication Problems

Not responding appropriately when spoken to or not responding at all can also cause misunderstandings to occur, leading to inaccurate perceptions. I'm sure many an argument has occurred because I responded inappropriately. I thought they said one thing, in actuality they said something different and that's all it took for world war three to erupt! When a loved one speaks to me and I don't respond at all they may feel ignored, unimportant and unloved; when the simple truth is, I didn't hear them.

Selective Hearing

Of course there's also the issue of "selective hearing." I hear when I want to hear. I wish I could have a dollar for every time I've heard that! There are so many variables that go into hearing it's hard for people with normal hearing to understand why sometimes I get it and sometimes I don't! There are actually about 50 different factors related to the speaker, the listener and the environment that influence my ability to understand.

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Yes, I publicly admit, I have selective hearing, as I'm an active listener and I have to make the choice to pay attention in order to understand.

My Family's Perception

Ahhhh, how sweet it is—using these maladaptive coping strategies is so much easier than struggling to listen and understand. That's why I use them. Or is it really easier? Maybe it just seems so because I'm not sure what to do instead. One thing I have learned the hard way is the use of these strategies can have a devastating impact on those closest to me, because they often interpret my use of them as something negative about them rather than my own struggle to hear and understand.


It's human nature to think about myself first before thinking of others. Therefore it's not surprising when my son interprets my lack of response as ignoring him, further deducing he's not important to me, instead of realizing a communication breakdown occurred. It's also important to remember hearing loss is invisible—my son does not have a constant visual reminder of my hearing loss and the resulting communication breakdown that often occurs, which further complicates the situation.

Sadly what really happens is often my loved ones internalize my maladaptive coping strategies as a statement about who they are and what they mean to me. Aside from God, no one or no thing is more

important to me than my loved ones. It's crucial that I understand how they perceive my maladaptive coping strategies and seek to make use of more effective ones. What began as sweet—the easier way to cope—turns ripe and sour all too quickly!

References

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Cathy Kooser, MSW, LISW, is a licensed independent social worker who has a severe hearing loss. Using her own personal struggles as well as relevant research, she developed and teaches an aural rehabilitation program titled *The Kooser Program: The Hidden Impact of Hearing Loss* (www.thekooserprogram.com). This program, formatted into a one-day workshop, is being used by the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation in Ohio as part of the rehabilitation process for consumers requesting assistance related to their hearing disability. The workshop is designed to educate both the consumers and their families about hearing loss. Cathy's program is available in eight states and she is working to expand her program throughout the nation. She lives in Dayton, Ohio, and was co-chair with Leslie Iannarino of the 2010 Dayton Walk4Hearing. She can be reached at ckooser@soents.com.



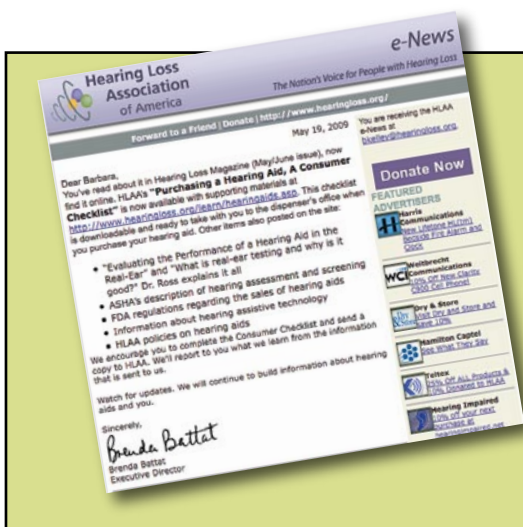
Cathy and her daughter, Jennie



Cathy and George Thomas



Cathy and her son, David



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