

# How Were Your Holidays?



By Sam Trychin

**What did you do for the holidays? It is a tradition for many people to gather together with family and friends to celebrate, eat a hearty meal, and share experiences since the last time they met. However, some people—we're sure you are not one of them—use their hearing loss as an excuse to avoid such gatherings. Read on if you, or someone you love, stayed at home rather than go, but would have gladly gone if hearing loss was not a troublesome issue.**

**The focus of this article is on those people who avoid social events due to experiences they have had with embarrassing or frustrating communication breakdowns due to hearing loss.**

## **Mary's Story**

Mary is one example of someone who takes extreme measures to avoid interaction with other people. She lives on the edge of life—the periphery—alone in a condominium in a well-to-do retirement community. She has more of her meals in a central dining area. She goes there just as it opens or just prior to its closing, sits away from other people, eats rapidly and leaves immediately thereafter in order to avoid having to talk with anyone during the meal.

At home, she no longer watches TV because of neighbor's complaints that the television is too loud. She has had warnings from the property manager that any more complaints and she would be asked to move. Mary does not have a telephone because she cannot understand what callers say. She does not leave her condominium except for meals and has been out of touch with her family for several years. She no longer has contact with any of her friends.

This is a true story although Mary is not her real name. A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to work with Mary. She was 55, had a bilateral, moderate-to-severe hearing loss, used two outdated hearing aids, and knew nothing about assistive devices or other strategies for dealing with hearing loss. She was living an isolated, barren, boring, and depressing existence.

Granted that Mary is an extreme example of a person choosing to separate and isolate herself from direct human contact. We find many other people with loss of hearing also do that, but on a less limiting basis. Many have stopped going to restaurants because of difficulty understanding waiters and/or dining partners. Others stop going out to play bridge or no longer go to parties or other events. Some have stopped

attending family gatherings at holidays or on other occasions. Or, they might go to a social event, but choose to sit off to one side and avoid talking to others as much as possible. All these people miss opportunities to share communication with others. *These communication opportunities are extremely important.*

### **Our Survival Dependencies**

The reason communication is so important to us humans is that we are all primarily social beings. We are dependent on other people for basic survival for the first few years, if not a decade, of our lives and for many of us much longer than that. This survival dependency is at the root of our need for being part of a group of other human beings.

Starting in early infancy, brain growth is dependent upon social interactions with primary caretakers, usually mothers. Eye contact, smiles, warm caresses and soothing baby-talk initiate connections between neurons, neurotransmitter release, and helpful hormone production. Later in life, interacting with other people is necessary for knowing where we stand in regard to the group we are in. Do we feel safe and secure because we are accepted, or has a feeling of rejection resulted in a basic threat to our survival?

The need to belong to a social grouping is built into our genetic structure, and we react physically as well as emotionally to any threats of being cut off from other people. These emotional reactions do not initially occur at the conscious level, but are subconscious reactions and can be very powerful. Cutting oneself off from other people can produce major problems because of this inherited physical and emotional need for social contact, approval, and support.

### **The Price of Isolation**

People pay a heavy price for self-imposed isolation and so do their family members and friends who would otherwise enjoy their companionship. The price can be measured in terms of the negative physical consequences of cutting oneself off from social connections, missing out on interesting or

educational experiences, and curtailing opportunities to experience personal achievement and satisfaction.

The payoff for separating oneself from other people and experiences has to be sufficient to compensate for what is lost; otherwise, people would not do it. The payoff for most of us who curtail social situations is avoidance or escape from anxiety, fear, or panic reactions generated by real or imagined experiences in communication situations.

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Experiencing some form of social embarrassment, humiliation, or rejection due to hearing loss-communication difficulties can be quite painful. People who grew up with hearing loss and were teased and shunned by their peers over a number of years may even have developed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and be unable to be around people without experiencing an array of very unpleasant and perhaps inexplicable physiological reactions.

What is the basis for the tendency to react in ways that may not be in our own best interest? Why has Mary opted to lead such a barren and depressing existence? When asked if her decision to isolate herself made sense in terms of enjoying her life, she had to admit that it did not. So, what forces operated to motivate her seemingly non-sensical behavior? Thankfully, current research in neurology and physiology has shed light on what drove Mary's self-limiting behavior.

### **Our Subconscious Reactions**

Our brains operate at different levels. Each level has its own functions and responsibilities. When operating normally the different brain areas cooperate and function together smoothly. At one level, brain function is reflexive and

automatically operating below the level of consciousness. Humans have many processes that occur at the subconscious level. We don't want to have to consciously think about controlling our heartbeats, blood pressure, or respiration.

It is much the same with reactions to threat or danger. If you were crossing the street and looked up to see a car bearing down on you, it would not be wise to have to stop and think, "Okay, here comes a car bearing down on me, what are my options here? What would be a good thing to do?" You would be dead or badly injured by then. Nature has provided us with automatic, built-in, unconscious reactions that allow us to react instantaneously to threats or danger—the fight or flight reactions to danger.

Once we have experienced a threat to survival, the emotional reaction to that situation becomes encoded in the subconscious areas of the brain, and similar situations later on will elicit the same emotional reaction.

These virtually automatic emotional responses to threat, mediated at lower levels in the brain from where rational thinking occurs can have an inhibiting effect on higher-level functions of judgment and decision-making. These subconscious emotional reactions also occur at a faster rate than our more rational thought processes. *Have you ever, when upset, said or done something that you immediately regretted having said or done?* This is an example of how unconsciously and rapidly these emotionally driven responses can occur and how they can preempt our judgment.

The emotional reactions to threat or danger that we usually experience, fear, anxiety, and/or anger, if sustained over time, can lead to emotional depletion which may be manifested as depression. The physiological processes that underlie these emotions are at best uncomfortable and may become physically as well as psychologically painful. Rapid, upper chest breathing leads to oxygen depletion and feelings of suffocation. Rapid

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heartbeat results in frightening pounding sensations in the chest area, high blood pressure, stomach pains, and muscle aching are additional correlates of the physiological processes that underlie fear, anxiety, or anger. These physical reactions lead us to do things to alleviate the discomfort and feel better in the moment.

When these reactions are strong or of long-standing they become reflexive, that is, they operate below the level of consciousness, much as does our respiration, heart rhythms, and digestive processes. As said above, when strong enough, the brain pathways leading to these reactions preempt other brain areas that are responsible for reflective, rational decision making, planning, and judgment. We become unable to make a reasoned choice how best to respond and fall back on avoidance and escape behaviors, even when they are not in our best interest.

Unfortunately, that means that sometimes the things we do to diminish the discomfort may, in the longer run, produce even greater negative effects. Think of Mary staying alone to avoid situations in which she might experience these kinds of negative reactions to communication difficulties. Her avoidance behavior produced another set of highly uncomfortable and distressing feelings—boredom, loneliness, and despair. Mary's reflexive emotional reaction to just the thought of interacting with another person had the power to prevent her from risking being around other people.

### **What Mary Did Not Know**

A major issue in Mary's case is that she was not aware of effective tactics or strategies for preventing or reducing communication breakdowns that would have allowed her to understand better what other people said to her. The same may be true for other people who avoid social situations due to previously experienced negative social reactions to communication problems related to their hearing loss.



This is not an indication of any personal inadequacy, but usually due to lack of information about what can be done to increase understanding in communication situations.

In addition, there is a prevailing negative stereotype about hearing loss in our country, which can contribute to the risk of feeling second class. Additionally, many people with a hearing loss have the mistaken belief that hearing aids are their only avenue for combating misunderstandings, dealing with safety issues, and managing other problems associated with it. Lack of information about and failure to use assistive listening technology is another contributor to preventable communication failure in social situations.

### **There are Remedies**

Fortunately there are additional remedies that, when used, allow people with hearing loss to participate in social activities, enjoy cultural events, and pursue personal interests. One remedy focuses on learning and practicing methods for preventing or reducing the occurrence of communication problems in the first place. When communication hassles are reduced to a minimum, emotional and physical reactions are reduced to an acceptable level. Then, there is no need to escape from or avoid social situations.

A second remedy is learning and

practicing procedures for regulating one's discomforting emotional reactions. There are research-validated procedures that are easily learned that serve to greatly reduce emotional and physical reactions when communication problems occur.

When we can maintain emotional composure in a difficult situation, we are able to use judgment and rational decision-making processes to determine the best course of action to take to resolve whatever problem we are facing. These two remedies together, learning effective communication strategies and practicing emotional regulation, enable people to participate in meaningful, enjoyable interactions with others. In future editions of this article, I will discuss these two remedies in detail.

So, how were the holidays for you? Hopefully, you were able to join in and enjoy yourself at family or social gatherings. If you experienced something similar to what is discussed in this article, we would appreciate your sharing the experience with us. Let us know what you would like to be different for the holidays next year—what changes you would like to see happen? We will be happy to work with you by suggesting ways to try to facilitate changes. ■■■

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