

Hearing Loss Association of America

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# Hearing Loss Magazine



*Gael Hannan*  
**Hearing Loss Isn't Funny**





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# Hearing Loss Isn't Funny

By Gael Hannan

**K**ee your sense of humor. Experts say this is the trick to living well with hearing loss.

But—what if you don't have one?

Well then, they say, you can learn to laugh at yourself.

What if you don't know HOW, or CAN'T, or don't WANT to? What if hearing loss has amputated your funny bone?

Hearing loss just isn't funny. Quite the opposite; it drains us physically, emotionally and often financially. It's not easy to guffaw at malfunctioning hearing aids, confused conversations and irritated relationships. Giggles don't bubble from our lips when we make a comment that makes other people stop talking and give us the "you've got two heads" look—which of course means the discussion has moved on to something else while we're stuck in five minutes ago. (I wish someone would announce a new topic—"And now we shall talk about politics.")

Even people who are natural rays of smiling sunshine find it challenging to deal with a life-changing hearing loss. How many people, reeling from a 20 decibel drop in hearing, would say, "Gosh, isn't that just my luck? Say, did you hear the one about the guy who couldn't hear his wife..."

How was I supposed to laugh when a goofy mutt woke me up to show off his breakfast: my hearing aid, with bits of it still clinging to the doggy-curly of his chin? How to cough up a chuckle at embarrassing mishears such as accepting a date, only to find the man had asked something quite different? Or when I delivered one of my famous non-sequiturs: "Mom, can you help me with an essay?" "That's great, say hi to him for me."

Almost every hearing loss joke is a variation on one or two basics—which the average person with hearing loss will hear about a thousand times in their lifetime. The first goes

something like this: "What day is it?" "Thursday." "Me too, let's get a drink." And I wish I had a dollar for every time I've asked, "Would you mind speaking up, I have hearing loss," and the answer shoots back, "Pardon?"

We're expected to laugh at all this?

Yes. Because it helps. (This is a good time to note that people with hearing loss are very good at laughing in group conversations. We laugh when others laugh and stop laughing when they do. Admittedly, that's not quite the same thing as a real sense of humor, and our bluffing usually just gets us into more trouble. Just saying that we do know how to laugh...)

Growing up in a small family—my parents, one sister and me—it was easy to understand dinner conversations because the kitchen table wasn't big; anyone's lips were only two dinner plates away. Even so, I would respond goofily to something I thought I heard, which amused everybody but me. We laughed a lot, en famille, because my father said the Lord loves a cheerful idiot and he felt we all qualified.

But everything is funny, according to Will Rogers, when they happen to someone else. I can see the hearing people (especially the show-off types who claim they can hear a pin drop two counties over) almost implode as they try to suppress a smile or laugh at something we misheard. But later, when we're out of earshot—which is usually not too far away—they tell these stories about us. Our communication faux pas and verbal boo-boos make us the friendly butt of funny stories: "I told Gael we were worried about our son's shyness, and she said thank heavens no one in her family has sinus trouble." Har-de-har-har.

But hey, sometimes I laugh while the Hearing Husband doesn't. He and I were living in a condo, waiting

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Left: Doug, Gael and their son, Joel



Below: Gael and Hearing Husband Doug



Right: Gael gave convention-goers some humorous communication tips at the Opening Session.

Below: Gael with her fellow Canadian HLAA members



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to move into our first house. He went to the lobby for some long-forgotten reason, and I closed the door after him and went back to watching a movie, which was loud. At some point, I might have vaguely wondered why he wasn't back, but I was engrossed in the movie. At a momentary break in the noise, the phone rang beside me.

"Hello?"

"IT'S ME!"

"Oh hi, honey. Where are you?"

"In the LOBBY using the entrance phone!"

"But what...OMG...did I lock you out?"

"YES...YOU...DID! I've been back and forth between the apartment, pounding on the door, and back down here, and calling up for a whole bloody half hour!"

C'mon, don't you agree this was funny? I mean, it's not like I locked him outside in a snowstorm in his underpants! The Hearing Husband is also not amused with the consequences when I don't hear the water running. Our two-year-old somehow flipped on a sink tap without me seeing or hearing it, and the resulting flood knocked out our phone line and electric garage door opener for 24 hours. And we're just starting to laugh about the recent flood in our camper when I didn't quite turn the tap all the way off before going to bed. Mopping up at 4:30 in the morning definitely ain't funny and it didn't help that the cat had refused to wade to his litterbox and "went" on the sofa.

Parenting with hearing loss can be challenging. I was engaged in an up-the-stairs shouting match with my teenage son; would he please get a move on and pack his darn hockey bag! I felt a tap on the shoulder; he was behind me, hysterical at watching me yell and gesture up the stairs to an empty bedroom, while he'd been answering me from the basement—where he was packing his darn hockey bag. I hate getting caught out like that.

After a lifetime of hearing loss, this stuff still happens. Even with a commitment to good communication, hearing aids, and soon, a cochlear implant, I still have occasional bad hearing days when I seem to ask for repeats with every breath I take. On these days, I could swear that somebody had just passed a law that all citizens must speak as unclearly as possible with Gael Hannan for 24 hours. On these days, I'm a self-centered, walking pity party.

But the next day, I can usually manage a whimpering smile at my day of bad hearing, and a couple of days later, maybe a weak ha-ha. Eventually, the embarrassment and frustration fade to black, leaving the funny bits intact.

**In most cases, our hearing loss is permanent; we get to keep it—forever and ever, amen—and if we don't find a way to laugh, all we've got left are frustration and tears.**

(Okay, Digby the dog did look hysterical with hundreds of dollars' worth of hearing aid hanging from his hairy face.)

In most cases, our hearing loss is permanent; we get to keep it—forever and ever, amen—and if we don't find a way to laugh, all we've got left is frustration and tears. The late comedian Bob Hope once said, "I have seen what a laugh can do. It can transform almost unbearable tears into something bearable, even hopeful."

It is absolutely possible to hone the hearing loss sense of humor, even if you think you don't have one. The first step is understanding that you're not the only one going through this; you share it with millions of people around the world. The next step is to connect with some of these people, either in person or on social media. Through HLAA and other consumer groups, you can share your heartbreaking and hilarious stories that turn out to be universal—only the names, dates and locations are different.

Hearing aid feedback when someone leans in close for a kiss? We've been there, done that. Spent a sleepless night in a hotel, staring at the alarm clock and clutching the Shake-Awake for fear of missing your flight? Yup, us too.

Had to figure out if your man really just said—at 5 a.m. when you weren't quite awake—"Let's get married" when you didn't have your hearing aids in? Okay, maybe that only happened to me (but lucky for him, I'm an ace speechreader).

Allan Klein, author of *The Healing Power of Humor*, wrote, "You may not be able to change a situation, but with humor you can change your attitude about it." When hearing loss causes its inevitable daily communication breakdowns—some tiny, some big—we do what we can to get through them.

No, hearing loss isn't funny—until you find the power to tell the joke on yourself. If you can't, allow me to quote the famous t-shirt: "If you can't laugh at yourself, I'll be happy to do it for you."

We can laugh at our hearing loss. Just give us some time. **HLM**

*HLAA Member Gael Hannan is a writer, actor and public speaker who grew up with a progressive hearing loss that is now severe-to-profound. She is a past director on the national board of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association and created The Hearing Foundation of Canada's award-winning Sound Sense hearing awareness program for Canadian elementary students. As a passionate advocate for people with hearing loss, she writes a weekly column for HearingHealthMatters.org and delivers insightful, entertaining workshops across the continent for people with hearing loss, hearing health professionals, and the general public.*

## **Gael Hannan's *The Way I Hear It***

In *The Way I Hear It*, Gael Hannan explodes one myth after another in a witty and insightful journey into life with hearing loss—at every age. Part memoir, part survival guide, *The Way I Hear It* is an insider account of the frustrations of communicating with hearing loss: pillow talk and other relationships, raising a child, in the classroom and on the job, hearing technology and the everyday things we like to do.

Gael offers advice on how to bridge the gap between consumer and professional in order to get the best possible hearing health care, as well as tips for effective communication, poetic reflections and humorous, poignant stories from the people she has met in her advocacy work throughout North America. This is a book for people with hearing loss—but also for their families, friends and the professionals who serve them.

*The Way I Hear It* is available for ordering from FriesenPress and other online retailers in hard or soft cover, or as an e-book.

E-book also available from iTunes, Kindle, Kobo, Nook and Google Play.

