

# The Emotional Side of Hearing Loss

BY IVETTE CEJAS, PH.D.

"Don't ignore your hearing loss or the emotions that may come with it. A review study found higher rates of anxiety in individuals with hearing loss in eight out of 10 studies reviewed."



“I’ve lived with hearing loss from a young age, and growing up with it was challenging, to say the least. There were times when I felt isolated, frustrated and even embarrassed, especially in social situations where I struggled to keep up with conversations. The constant effort to hear and understand others was exhausting, and I often felt like I was missing out on the world around me.”  
—Isabella



“Losing my hearing has truly been something one has to go through to understand. Overcoming the challenge of change and being different was not easy, although the positive change in my mindset, and the people I have met are unforgettable.”  
—Kylie

**A**s a psychologist, I have come to realize that hearing loss is a journey from the initial stages of grief and denial, to acceptance, to seeking treatment and intervention, to finding yourself and a new identity, to experiencing happiness again and learning that you can succeed.

### A Misunderstood Condition

Throughout my career, it has surprised me that individuals with other health conditions, like diabetes or cancer, are frequently more open about their condition than individuals with hearing loss. Why is this the case? Hearing loss is often misunderstood by the public and/or portrayed in social media either inaccurately or in a simplified way that individuals cannot connect with. Hearing loss is an invisible condition that often is associated with a sense of loss. For my pediatric patients and families, this starts very early, but for those with adult onset of hearing loss, it can challenge their beliefs of what is “normal” and create resistance to a potential new way of life.

### Hearing Loss Affects More Than Your Ears

It has been well documented that hearing loss is not just about auditory access or listening, but it has compounding consequences for the whole person. Any degree of hearing loss, if left untreated, can affect communication, social life, employment and mental health. The truth is that hearing loss can make you feel isolated, worried and sometimes even depressed. People are generally comfortable talking about physical problems, such as chest pain, body aches, etc. But what happens when you can no longer follow a conversation in a group, or participate in a discussion in a restaurant? What do you do in these situations? Are you embarrassed to say you can’t hear what is going on? Did you even realize that people were talking to you? How do these situations make you feel?

### Acceptance and Intervention

Working with my patients and teaching them that all emotions are valid and welcome is crucial in navigating the hearing loss journey. You may feel angry, sad or annoyed. Perhaps you are at a different stage altogether, and you’re ready to speak up. However, most people say it’s easier to avoid social gatherings than to explain or acknowledge hearing loss. While avoiding these situations might *seem* easier, it can damage your mental health and overall well-being. Isolating yourself leads to further feelings of loneliness and frustration. And did you know that loneliness is associated with one of the

“... I received bilateral cochlear implants, which was a difficult transition at first, especially because I didn’t have the community and support system that I have now. The emotional toll was significant—I felt like I was starting over in many ways, learning to hear all over again and adjusting to a new way of experiencing sound. It was overwhelming and lonely at times.”  
—Isabella

most pressing public health epidemics currently facing the globe—the rise of mental illness?

Don’t ignore your hearing loss or the emotions that may come with it. A review study found higher rates of anxiety in individuals with hearing loss in eight out of 10 studies reviewed (Shoham, et al., 2019). An increased risk for anxiety is associated with severity of hearing loss and tinnitus. Other studies have also found an increased risk for social isolation and loneliness (Shukla, et al., 2020). This decreased social engagement has also been linked with depression and poorer quality of life (Li, et al., 2014). The good news is that literature also documents a decrease in anxiety and depression for those who seek intervention for their hearing loss.

Your first step is to establish care with an otology or audiology practice for an updated hearing test and evaluation. These providers can help you with finding a solution or technology to improve your quality of life



*Dr. Ivette Cejas consults with a young patient and his mother at her pediatric audiology clinic.*

and daily functioning. But keep in mind that new opportunities or technology can be difficult.

Next and most importantly, if you are feeling down or no longer engaging in the activities that you enjoyed before, reach out to your primary care physician, or talk with your audiology team and ask for a referral to a mental health specialist. Lastly, with the holidays quickly approaching, make sure to get yourself out there. Start talking with friends and family about the best way to communicate with you in a group or noisy place. It is okay to speak up for yourself and let them know what you need. Navigating the hearing loss journey can be difficult, but you don't have to do it alone. Reach out to others that are going through similar situations, join a support group, engage in some mindfulness activities or simply make a list of things you want to try and make a plan. [See "Socializing Strategies" below.]

### Journey to Resilience

I hope that you found this piece helpful, and that it has provided you with encouragement to seek help when you need it. You are not alone in this journey we call life. Be brave and make yourself a promise to find the time to focus on you—the raw, special and true you!

As one of my very wise adolescent patients, Theo, told me, *"I turned my disability into a journey that has shaped my resilience and character into who I am today, and who I will be in the future."*

A special thanks to patients Isabella, Kylie and Theo for sharing their experiences with me and allowing me to share their perspectives on the emotional side of hearing loss.

To learn more about my research, visit [bit.ly/drcejas](https://bit.ly/drcejas) or click the QR code.



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View our HLAA 2024 Research Symposium, *The Emotional Side of Hearing Loss*, featuring Dr. Cejas and a panel of medical and psychology experts, at [youtu.be/-KHtBnLWZtA](https://youtu.be/-KHtBnLWZtA)

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## Socializing Strategies

Hearing loss can make communication challenging, especially in social settings. If the thought of holiday gatherings makes you anxious, check out these helpful tips:

- Contact the host in advance to request special accommodations
- Choose a seat that minimizes background noise and optimizes speechreading
- Use assistive listening technology such as live captioning apps or a remote microphone

- Ask others for what you need to participate fully in conversations
- Take an occasional "time out" if needed during the event to rest

For more socializing strategies, visit our new **Living Well with Hearing Loss** web page:

