



Hearing Loss Affects More Than Your Ears

BY ALISON FREEMAN

As a psychologist with severe hearing loss, I often find myself reflecting on how it has impacted both my own life and the lives of my clients. Often, people erroneously assume that hearing loss is purely a medical diagnosis that only affects the ears. Actually, hearing loss is a complex interplay of social, cognitive and emotional factors that can significantly impact a person's quality of life.

In the United States, hearing loss is the third most common chronic health condition, twice as prevalent as diabetes or cancer.¹ Like many other conditions, hearing loss is on a spectrum that can range from mild to profoundly deaf—and affects every person differently. Even a mild hearing loss can have an impact and often progressively worsens over time. Whether from birth or acquired later, having a hearing loss requires learning new ways to adapt personally and navigate the hearing landscape.

Mental Health, Self-Identity and Hearing Loss

Many doctors and audiologists may only address the physical aspect of hearing loss without recognizing its psychological impact. However, hearing loss is primarily a *communication disability* that affects every aspect of personality, mental health and interactions with family, friends, relationships, co-workers and society at large. The daily effort to understand conversations, music or professional meetings can lead to a constant state of stress—from the frustration of asking people to repeat themselves to the embarrassment of misunderstanding conversations to the fear of missing out (FOMO) on the punchline or important information.

Due to such communication challenges, hearing loss is often associated with a higher risk of anxiety, depression, withdrawal and isolation, particularly in older adults.² Many people with this invisible disability also

find themselves “in between” the hearing and non-hearing worlds, which leads to a sense of not belonging. For example, my client Marco—a 28-year-old photographer who was born deaf—is in therapy for loneliness and isolation. Raised with an oral approach that involved speaking, he never learned sign language. Thus, Marco feels unsupported socially, as he doesn’t seem to fit into either the hearing or deaf community.

People who lose their hearing as adults typically experience an identity crisis as their sense of competence and self-esteem plummet. About 10 years ago, I worked



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Ray Goldsworthy, Ph.D., shares his experience at an HLAA Los Angeles Chapter HOPE meeting, February 22, 2025.

with Jeffrey, a cancer survivor who had lost his hearing after a second round of chemotherapy. An addiction counselor, Jeffrey wondered if he would ever be able to interview clients again, which was a critical part of his work, and realized that his identity as a professional was radically impacted. To regain his confidence, he first needed to grieve and then become more accepting of his loss. Jeffrey had to learn that his hearing loss was only a part of who he was and that it didn't define him or his work as he learned strategies to help him communicate effectively.

Understanding the Impact of Hearing Loss

Several assumptions inform my communication with others in the hearing world: First, I assume that they know little, if anything, about hearing loss. Second, I realize most people are embarrassed about asking how to best communicate with me, because they think they should know. Telling them what I need up front lowers their stress and mine, too! Lastly, I must be patient with them and myself, which often means repeating my accommodation requests, such as: "Please face me" or "I can't see your mouth when you cover it."

A useful analogy I often use to help people understand the complexity of hearing loss is to compare it with low vision. A person who wears glasses doesn't need to

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explain their condition, and they may use their glasses for specific situations, like for reading or distance. They can easily explain what their vision is in finite numbers, e.g., 20/80. In contrast, hearing loss is an invisible disability that encompasses a multitude of factors and variations such as frequency, pitch, word discrimination and volume. Even for seasoned hearing aid or cochlear implant (CI) wearers, trying to explain the intricate interplay of all these factors can be confusing and difficult.

Unlike corrective lenses that may, in many cases, restore one's vision, hearing loss can never be fully restored, even with hearing aids or an implant, and is more subjective. One's identity might even change between different environments; for instance, am I "hard of hearing" when speaking to someone or "deaf" when I'm at a restaurant or movie theater?

A Safe Space on Social Media

Hearing Loss: The Emotional Side is an interactive Facebook support group that was started three years ago as a safe space to discuss the emotions around hearing loss.

Its three founders—all bilateral cochlear implant (CI) users with connections to HLAA, who have long volunteered to help people cope with hearing loss—launched the online community to address the emotional piece they felt was missing in each of their own hearing loss journeys.

Since 2022, the group has grown to nearly 4,000 members around the world with varying levels of hearing loss. Many people join after experiencing sudden hearing loss or because they are struggling to stay connected to their friends and family. For some, it's the first time they've had an opportunity to openly discuss their feelings about hearing loss.

Common threads include:

- How hearing loss affects interpersonal relationships, socialization, the workplace and sense of community
- Strategies for acceptance of hearing loss and the stages of grief
- Moments of triumph when individuals find solutions that will help them live their best lives with hearing loss



Current administrators and co-founders, Mary Grace Whalen and Robin Chisholm-Seymour, M.Ed., provide support and encouragement in member discussions. Robin is a retired mental health professional who also facilitates a pet loss support group; Mary Grace is a freelance writer and author who writes about hearing loss and grief. The third original co-founder is Richard Pocker, an author and podcaster focused on hearing loss. Find the group on Facebook: **Hearing Loss: The Emotional Side**.

Learning to Cope and Self-Advocate

The onset or progression of hearing loss can often lead to personality changes. Several studies^{3 4 5} have shown that adults with a new diagnosis of hearing loss can become introverted over time as they deal with the exhausting challenges of communication and having to constantly rely on hearing aids, technology and captioning. Conversely, I have found that the most effective way to reduce the psychological impact of hearing loss and successfully navigate the hearing world requires being *more* extroverted and proactively learning new coping skills—primarily self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy requires one to be more “out there”—if someone is an extrovert, who is comfortable with people and enjoys interacting with others, their adjustment will be easier than someone who is an introvert who prefers to be alone, is strongly independent and unlikely to seek emotional and social support.

My passion for teaching clients self-advocacy skills started long ago with Luisa, a client who became profoundly deaf from a serious case of meningitis eight years earlier. She was a severely depressed single mother who had two small children with whom she had a hard time communicating. I was appalled to learn that she had not been given any referrals or information about support resources (such as HLAA) or assistive technology by her doctors or audiologists to help adjust to her sudden deafness. She had no knowledge of the relay service, free captioned phones from the state or captioning apps on her computer and cellphone. She was truly isolated. However, her depression lifted significantly as she learned how to advocate for herself and use technology to communicate with friends and family more effectively.

Evolution Through Education

Successfully dealing with hearing loss is recognizing that stress is inevitable. More productive than trying to avoid stress is learning effective stress management and communication skills. This also means recognizing what is under my control, such as educating others about my hearing loss. I believe the more someone understands about my hearing loss, the more effective communication will be for both of us. That's why I wear my “educator's hat” every day when I meet new people or work with those who don't know me well.

In reflecting on my own journey as an individual and a professional with hearing loss, I see that I've come a long way from trying to hide my disability from others. I've progressed from bluffing my way through conversations to self-advocating and becoming more comfortable with my limitations. Most importantly, I recognize and emphasize my strengths.



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Dr. Freeman discusses the emotional aspects of hearing loss with Malik B. El-Amin and Ramona Lee at an HLAA Los Angeles Chapter meeting.

I love being able to share what I have learned in the hope of making another person's journey less painful. I'm honored to be a guide as they transform the road-blocks of anxiety and depression into confidence and self-advocacy. **HL**

Alison Freeman, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who counsels students at California State University at Northridge and also has a private therapy practice. She has had severe hearing loss since early childhood and is a long-time member of HLAA. Learn more: dralisonfreeman.net

Read her previous article in *Hearing Life* magazine Summer 2023 issue, *Back to School with Hearing Loss*: bit.ly/btshl23

Names and details of clients mentioned have been changed to protect their privacy. This article is for informational purposes only. For medical advice or diagnosis, or for mental health support, please consult a professional.

¹ Vital Signs: Noise-Induced Hearing Loss Among Adults—U.S. 2011-2012

² Hearing Loss, Loneliness, and Social Isolation: A Systematic Review

³ Hearing Loss in Adults: Psychological Impact and Coping Strategies

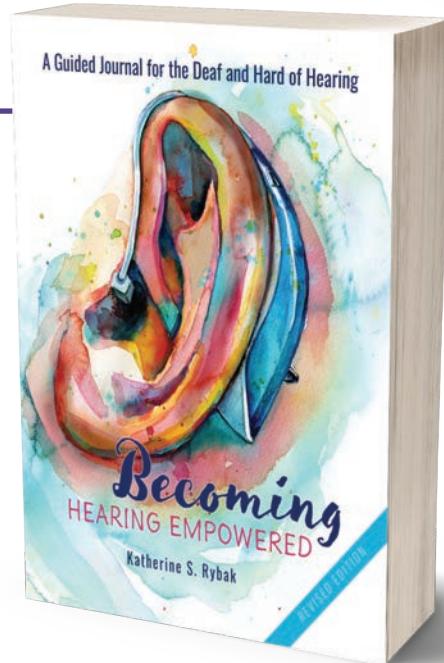
⁴ Social-Emotional Well-Being and Adult Hearing Loss: Clinical Recommendations

⁵ Hearing Loss and Psychosocial Outcomes: Influences of Social Emotional Aspects and Personality

Five Ways to Become Hearing Empowered

By Katherine S. Rybak

The stigma of hearing loss can influence your confidence, sense of identity, self-acceptance, relationships, social life and even your outlook on the future. But you are far more than your audiogram—follow these steps to live an empowered life with hearing loss.



1 Cultivate a growth mindset.

A fixed mindset can keep you stuck in current circumstances. By opening up to new possibilities, you can recognize and use your abilities to create more opportunities in life through dedication, learning and support.

2 Consider the past to change your future.

According to the framework of Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT), thoughts about a negative experience lead to feelings, which then impact behavior. With awareness, you can change how you think about past experiences, adjust your emotional response and engage more confidently in future social situations.

3 Actively challenge your internalized stigma.

Internalized stigma occurs when we cognitively or emotionally absorb negative messages and stereotypes about hearing loss and come to believe them as true. It is powerful to acknowledge how they have infiltrated our minds and influenced how we feel about ourselves.

4 Diversify your self-disclosure.

Telling people about your hearing loss may sometimes be as simple as saying, "I have a hearing loss." However, knowing how and when to use a carefully crafted technical, expanded or emotional self-disclosure can dramatically improve your relationships and access to accommodations.

5 Replenish and protect your energy with self-care.

Regardless of its severity, coping with your hearing loss on a daily basis often leads to listening fatigue, self-advocacy stress and technology weariness. Recognize how this impacts your well-being and nurture yourself with specific self-care practices to recover and protect yourself.



*Katherine S. Rybak is the author of *Becoming Hearing Empowered: A Guided Journal for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing* (available on Amazon) and a retired teacher for the deaf and hard of hearing. Visit her website at hearingoutloud.net.*