

# BOOK NOOK

REVIEW BY LARRY HERBERT

## *Hearing to the Max: Improving Conversations in the Most Difficult Listening Environments*

by John Greer Clark, Ph.D., Incus Press, 2022

I thought I was in nirvana when my new hearing aids, complete with all the latest bells and whistles, were fitted in the quiet of my audiologist's office. Then I resumed my daily life and realized that I still couldn't understand my mumbling son, or the high-pitched voice of my Scottish dancer friend or conversation in a noisy venue, even with my \$4,000 hearing aids. The lyrics to Alan Jackson's song, "Here in the Real World," started playing in my head.

I'd been gobsmacked by the simple, often forgotten fact that communication difficulties can't be completely, easily solved by the latest technology. The success of communication for people with hearing loss is a much more complicated, yet paradoxically simple equation, and that is the theme of a new handbook, *Hearing to the Max, Improving Conversations in the Most Difficult Listening Environments*, by John Greer Clark, Ph.D. Dr. Clark is a retired audiologist with 25 years of practice and professor emeritus at the University of Cincinnati, where he served as audiology program director. With Dr. Fred Martin, he coauthored an acclaimed textbook, *Introduction to Audiology*, now in its 13th edition. He is certified in both audiology and speech-language pathology.

Dr. Clark emphasizes that "hearing aids, the cornerstone of hearing loss management, are only capable of restoring about 50% of a person's lost hearing." That's not mentioned in those hyperbolic manufacturers' advertisements for hearing aids. Neither, in my experience, has it been emphasized in my own ongoing audiological education, as it lends perspective to my efforts to improve my hearing. He provides a broader perspective: responsibility for improving communication lies with the speaker and listener. He notes that a psychologist friend has suggested that "we replace the term hearing loss with communication loss."

### Looking at Hearing Loss from Both Sides

The author cautions, "Hearing loss is most frequently treated from an individual perspective, but we must realize that the impact of hearing loss stretches well beyond

the person with the hearing loss." He quotes the late Mark Ross, Ph.D., a respected audiologist and long-time contributor to this magazine: "If someone in the family has a hearing loss, the whole family has a hearing problem." That could be amended to include "circle of friends," in addition to family.

Reminding us that the person with hearing loss often bears the brunt of fault-finding for unsuccessful communication, Dr. Clark presents a chapter entitled "Sources of Communication Breakdown," which includes a three-column chart that details the many contributing factors and guilty abettors, ranging from the listener and the talker to the environment. He also sets forth some practical tips involving the creative use of acronyms and simple case studies. (See sidebar)

Although he is not a psychologist, Dr. Clark is well equipped with the wisdom that comes from years of helping patients. He includes motivational therapy strategies to point out our tendency to use "fake" hearing and avoid telling others about our hearing loss. He explains that we fear being different or standing out from others if we reveal our hearing loss. We'd rather fake it than be deemed different or less than whole. None of this is anything I haven't heard or read previously, but it seems that it never completely sank in, or has often been forgotten.

### Taking Steps Toward Self-Advocacy

I used some of his strategies when I went with some old friends to lunch this past week. I arrived early and surveyed the restaurant seating areas, and then I decided to step up and request outdoor seating, where I experienced a friendlier hearing environment. Once I was out on the patio, I asked the waitstaff to turn down the ambient music emanating from a couple of speakers, and they gladly did so. Finally, I placed my remote Bluetooth microphone on the table, so I could take full advantage of an effective assistive listening tool. I had advocated for



both myself, as well as several others in the group who have hearing loss.

Dr. Clark includes a brief, helpful, introductory chapter entitled the “Anatomy of the Ear,” as well as an overview of basic audiological testing. He finds the frequent use of labels for different levels of hearing loss, such as mild, moderate, severe or profound, insufficiently descriptive, so he avoids them. He does not include a closer look at hearing aid or assistive listening technology but does recommend HLAA to people with hearing loss, particularly for its educational and support missions, since he recognizes that losing one’s hearing can be a lonely journey.

This handbook is an insightful guide for your hearing loss odyssey. It should, in my opinion, accompany that fancy packaging you receive when you leave your audiologist’s office with your new hearing aids and should also be required reading for family members, budding audiology students or experienced hearing care professionals. My love/hate relationship with hearing aids will no doubt continue, but this handbook has tempered my expectations and has helped me become more optimistic about coping with my hearing loss. **HL**



*Larry Herbert is retired and lives in Richmond, Virginia. A member of the HLAA Greater Richmond Chapter, he currently leads efforts to promote hearing loops in the community. His interest in assistive listening technology was initially sparked when he helped his father communicate via text and email. He is a graduate of the University of Virginia and can be reached at lawrence.herbert@gmail.com.*

## Learning to WATCH and CARE

Dr. Clark has created some clever mnemonic devices that can help people who have hearing loss become self-advocates and help hearing people improve their communication skills to aid those with hearing loss with speech comprehension.

### WATCH

Individuals who have hearing loss can take the initiative when communicating with others to make things easier for everyone.

- W** Watch for a clear view of the face of the person who is speaking to you.
- A** Ask for a speaker to repeat the part of the sentence you missed.
- T** Tell others when you have hearing loss and what you need to hear them better.
- C** Change the situation when noisy conditions prevent successful hearing.
- H** Helpful gestures can improve understanding.

### CARE

Speakers must be more attentive to communication, too, and be aware of Dr. Clark’s insights about what comprises clear speech.

- C** Clear speech is important.
- A** Attention is a precursor to comprehension.
- R** Rephrase sentences or fragments misunderstood by the individual with hearing loss.
- E** Expectations must be recognized in the context of conditions in the environment.



## HLAA MISSION CIRCLE

A monthly online giving program offering convenience while supporting work for people with hearing loss.

[hearingloss.org/make-an-impact](https://hearingloss.org/make-an-impact)