



© Cindy Dyer

As technology has evolved, its effect on our lives has been revolutionary, especially for people with hearing loss.

Evolutionary Versus Revolutionary

BY BARBARA KELLEY

I often go to my good friend, Google, for precise word meanings. Here are some definitions and terminology to get us started.

Evolutionary is an adjective meaning “relating to the gradual development of something.”

Revolutionary is an adjective meaning “involving or causing a complete or dramatic change.” When “revolutionary” is used as a noun, it means “some one who fearlessly advocates for radical change.”

Technology is evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. Who would have dreamed 20 years ago that you could hold your phone, TV and computer in the palm of your hand? Clicking on an app to get a ride in the city, instead of standing on the corner hailing a cab, would have seemed like science fiction back then.

Look at hearing technology. We’ve gone from one-channel cochlear implants (CIs) to multi-channel CIs. Hearing aids have progressed from analog to digital models with features such as telecoils, artificial intelligence, Bluetooth streaming and more. Most recently, it has even become possible for adults with perceived, mild-to-moderate hearing loss to buy self-fitted hearing aids over the counter (OTC).

As technology has evolved, its effect on our lives has been revolutionary, especially for people with hearing loss. For example, the phone has become our communication access lifeline with captioned telephone service, automatic speech recognition with live transcription of dialogue, and direct audio input for phone calls while blocking out background noise, as well as other hearing enhancements.

A Fitting Change: OTC Hearing Aids Arrive

For many of you reading this, it’s hard to grasp why someone would want to buy a hearing aid over the counter. We’ve depended on the good care of audiologists and hearing instrument specialists to diagnose, fit and adjust hearing aids for years, and that model of care has not gone away. But there’s no one-size-fits-all solution to hearing loss.

In 2016, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine made a recommendation to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to open a new category of OTC hearing devices when they published their report, *Hearing Health Care for Adults: Priorities for Improving Access and Affordability* (2016). The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) also sponsored research that included studies on new hearing health delivery models for underserved populations and research on technology to enable the development of effective, self-fitted hearing aids. Research solicited and sponsored by the NIDCD confirmed the feasibility of these novel service delivery models. The new category of OTC hearing devices officially opened on October 17, 2022, a few short months ago.* This was revolutionary.

Hearing loss and hearing health have catapulted hearing issues into the spotlight with the anticipation of OTC hearing aids and the hope that more people would have access to a device that could help. For example, HLAA was called on by more than 100 media outlets to comment on OTC hearing aids. We were diligent in our media responses in talking about the importance of hearing health to overall health, and we encouraged people to treat their hearing loss, whether it's with an OTC device or with help from a hearing care professional, depending on their circumstances. It's not a matter of buying an OTC hearing aid or consulting a hearing care professional; you can do both or choose one path. People now have choices and no more excuses not to try.

If you know someone with hearing loss — even a mild one that's just starting to be noticed — encourage them to take a step to hearing health care.

Evolution Meets Revolution

The evolution of technology met the revolution of heightened public awareness. Hearing health is finally seen as a major health issue we can't ignore if we want to be productive at home, school or in the workplace, as well as stay connected and engaged. Hearing loss is an invisible condition: some people bluff their way through it, and others assume that if you wear hearing aids, you can hear perfectly. Finally, after HLAA's years of work in advocating for accessible and affordable hearing health, along with raising awareness that hearing loss is a major health concern, a revolution is happening.

The OTC market has yet to play out and develop. As innovation presents itself and technology evolves, we should see a future we never imagined. This is revolutionary. It's a change in the market and how hearing care is delivered.

But — and this is key — for technology to help, people must adopt it. Hearing devices can't sit on a shelf or be shut away in drawers, never to be worn. Consumer demand drives better product development and lower prices, no matter how the technology is delivered.

If you're someone whose hearing loss came on gradually as an adult, think back to when you first



In 1963, this article predicted the future of phones.

suspected you had a hearing loss or were diagnosed. Did you wait to get hearing aids until it got too difficult to manage the day? Did you wait until others nagged you into getting hearing aids or until you realized you weren't understanding speech very clearly anymore? Had you had the option of buying an OTC device to help with mild-to-moderate hearing loss and use it in specific listening situations, might you have taken that first step to hearing care sooner rather than later?

If you know someone with hearing loss — even a mild one that's just starting to be noticed — encourage them to take a step to hearing health care. Point them to hearingloss.org/OTC to see if an OTC hearing aid may or may not be the right path. If not, it's not the only path. Help us get people to take that first step. HLAA will be here to support people with solid information. **HL**

Barbara Kelley is executive director of HLAA. She can be reached at bkelly@hearingloss.org. Follow her on Twitter @Bkelley_HLAA.

*Tucci, Debara, M.D., M.S., M.B.A. and Califf, Robert M., M.D. "Over-the-Counter Hearing Aids: From Research to Policy to Practice," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol.3, Number 12, December 2, 2022.