

## Communication tips for audiologists to share with patients

By Shari Eberts

Shari Eberts is a hearing health advocate, writer, and the founder of [Living With Hearing Loss](#). “Communication tips for audiologists to share with patients” was originally published by the [Ida Institute](#) which Shari writes for regularly. The Ida Institute develops and integrates person-centered practice in hearing care.



When I first started losing my hearing, conversations became more difficult. Whether it was at work, or socially with friends, I began to miss small details of the discussion, especially punch lines of jokes. Even when I began wearing hearing aids, these problems persisted, especially in noisy environments. Sometimes I would pretend to hear, other times I would ask for a repeat, but what I never did was ask my conversation partner to use communication best practices, because I didn't know about them.

Simple things like keeping your mouth uncovered or making sure to face the person when you are speaking seem obvious to me now, but early on in my hearing loss journey, they were not.

In my e-book [Person-centered Care \(PCC\) from the Patient Perspective](#), I highlight sharing best practice communication tips as an important way audiologists [can think beyond the technology](#). When audiologists teach their patients how to have better conversations, with or without the use of hearing devices, they help patients stay connected to the important people in their lives, a primary goal of person-centered care.

### Communication best practices to improve conversation for people with hearing loss

Productive conversation with someone with hearing loss requires effort. Finding an appropriate location with low noise and good lighting is just the first step. [Both sides of the conversation](#) must be willing to follow communication best practices including taking turns speaking and maintaining eye contact. People with typical hearing bear the bigger burden and may need to adjust the pace and style of their speech, but people with hearing loss must also take responsibility for the success of the communication. Below I provide best practice tips for both sides of the conversation. Audiologists, please share these with patients.

### Tips for the conversation partner with typical hearing

Hearing aids are miraculous tools, but communication best practices are equally important, [particularly in difficult listening environments](#). Small changes in behavior can make a huge difference in the quality and ease of conversation for people with hearing loss. These include:

1. Get their attention before speaking. Someone with hearing loss may not realize you have begun speaking to them right away and miss important context in the first few phrases. If you give them the heads-up first, they will not need to play catch-up.

2. Provide context. Knowing what the topic of conversation is makes it much easier for the person with hearing loss to make educated guesses about the words they miss. If they know the conversation is about clothing, it will be easier to convert “—oot” into suit rather than fruit.
3. Speak clearly and at a normal volume and pace. Shouting or speaking extra slowly will distort your lips making lip-reading more challenging. Maintaining a moderate pace will provide processing time for people to make those educated guesses discussed above.
4. Keep your mouth uncovered and facing towards the person with hearing loss. This will aid with lip-reading and will eliminate any unnecessary barriers to the sound. Even if you are speaking to another person in a group conversation, the more you can direct your mouth towards the people with hearing loss, the better chance they have to hear you.
5. Pay attention to body language. If you see the person with hearing loss leaning towards you or looking confused, slow down or speak louder. You can also check in with them to make sure they understood what you said before continuing to speak. Ask them what you can do to help make it easier for them to hear and try your best to do it.

### **Tips for the person with hearing loss**

While many communication best practices rely on communication partners to make accommodations, there are also things the person with hearing loss can and should do. These include:

1. Arrive well rested. I often [hear better in the morning](#) after a quiet night of rest and relaxation for my brain. [Scheduling important conversations for early in the day](#) lets you bring your strongest hearing to the meeting. If this is not possible, try to factor in rest time ahead of the event to recharge your listening batteries.
2. Understand your hearing. Everyone’s hearing challenges are unique so each person must learn to identify which listening situations are most problematic for them and, through trial and error, what adjustments or accommodations are most helpful.
3. Advocate for yourself. Because [hearing loss is an invisible disability](#), people may not know that you need help unless you ask for it. Don’t be shy and be as specific as possible in your requests. Well-intentioned people may try to help you by shouting or leaning into your ear, but this will block their lips. Tell them what you need and they are more likely to give it a try.
4. Make peace with your hearing loss. If you seem comfortable with your hearing loss, others will be too. Forgive yourself if you miss some of the dialogue in a social situation and pace yourself so you can maintain energy for future conversations. Be ready to laugh at the mis-hearings that occur; they can often be hilarious.
5. Stay healthy and informed. Get plenty of rest, eat healthy food, and exercise. The better you feel, the more energy you will have for listening. Since context is important for following conversations, try to stay abreast of current news and social happenings. It is easier to understand a new name (of a country or a celebrity) if you have seen or heard it before.

### **Audiologists must practice what they preach**

Audiologists should employ these same communication best practices when interacting with patients. Remembering to face the patient and to speak clearly and at a moderate pace can feel challenging with appointments stacked up outside, but it is a critical element in providing person-centered care. Train your office staff to follow suit, both in person and when speaking to patients over the phone. Scheduling an appointment to see an audiologist, particularly for the first time, can be scary. Make sure you and your staff act like true partners right from the start.

Visit Shari's blog at [livingwithhearingloss.com](http://livingwithhearingloss.com)