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Behaviour Related to Hearing Impairment

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This edition of *Canadian Audiologist* is dedicated to vestibular function. Although I have very little personal or clinical experience with patients having vestibular disorders, I have often wondered whether I had any problems with balance related to my hearing impairment. After all, I have found that I seem to bump into things or trip over obstacles frequently. Those fears were completely laid to rest when I was going through the process of getting my cochlear implant. It turns out that my vestibular function is just fine, thank you. My eyes darted around like crazy during the caloric testing. Thank goodness I skipped breakfast that morning or else the poor cleaning staff would have been dealing with quite a mess.

So why do I bump into things? Why is my watch always scratched up? And are there any other weird behaviors that I do that might be a result of my hearing loss? Turns out there are quite a few. Below are a few examples of some of the weird things people with hearing loss do, why we do it, and how we can make it better.

Ignore People

I have been accused of being a snob. There are times that people might talk to me, but I just walked right by without acknowledging the person. Likely what happened to me is that the environment was noisy and I didn't hear my name embedded in all the background noise. Alternatively, the person could have been speaking to me on my left side, which is my non-implanted ear. I don't hear much on that side even in quiet. Or my batteries might have been dead. Or maybe I just wanted to enjoy some peace and quiet and turned everything off.

What To Do About It?

First off, anyone that knows me knows I am a very social person who never snubs anyone. Do not take offense. Try to get the attention of the person with hearing loss visually or by tapping on the shoulder.

Excessively Close Proximity

I do not do this too often, but I have seen others with hearing loss do this. Since we can't hear well, especially in background noise, we sometimes invade one's social space try to get closer to the sound source, in this case the talker.

What To Do About It?

First off, this behaviour is most likely exhibited by people who do not get amplification to assist with the hearing loss. The solution of course is to get proper amplification and assistive listening technology for noise.

Forgetting Names

Actually, I am not sure I am forgetting people's names, but rather I never heard it correctly in the first place. The reason people with hearing loss have such a hard time with names are that there is no linguistic context to assist us. For example, if some said, "Please pass the salt and _____," we know that the most likely final word is pepper. But if someone says, "Hello my name is _____, it could be anything. Other times, I may have misheard the name and called someone the wrong name. One example is Norma instead of Nadia. Hearing, learning, and remembering names are particularly difficult tasks for people with hearing loss.

What To Do About It?

The use of a wireless system that gets rid of noise is very helpful in this situation. In a noisy social situation, you have a better chance of hearing the name correctly. I also use a buddy system with a significant other (e.g., my wife) who has normal hearing. She fills me in with the names after the introductions. I also have a cue for my wife when introducing her to someone whose name I should know. For example, if I do not know the name of a person I really ought to know, I turn to my wife and say, "Have you two met yet?" She then promptly extends her hand and says, "Hello my name is Kim." Other person reciprocates. Problem solved.

Knock Over Drinks at Dinner Table

How on earth could this be related to hearing loss you ask? Simple. I am busy listening to someone across the table. It is a noisy restaurant. So now I have to rely more on lipreading cues for communication. I am staring at the person's lips, reach for my beverage without properly looking, and then knock it over.

What To Do About It?

Don't reach for the beverage while trying to listen. Use a wireless system to get rid of noise.

Bump Into Things/Scratch Up My Watch

This is very similar to the above scenario. If I am walking down the street with someone I am looking at his or her face to lipread. Since I am not paying attention to what's in front of me, I bash my watch into walls and posts. Sometimes I crash into people.

What To Do About It?

Buy cheap watches. Apologize profusely to people I bump into. And again, use a wireless system to get rid of the noise.

Speaking Too Loudly

This one is more obvious. Folks with hearing loss routinely have trouble monitoring their vocal intensity. And it gets worse when in noisier environments where it is harder to hear oneself or others.

What To Do About It?

This behaviour is also more typical in people who do not have personal hearing aids yet. The solution is simple…get properly fitted amplification.

Speaking Too Softly

This is more common for me. I do this for a number of reasons. First, I am scared that I am speaking too loud and so I overcompensate. Secondly, I do have a tendency to overestimate the hearing capabilities of normal hearing people. I think people with normal can hear a whisper from across a room.

What To Do About It?

I carefully watch the faces of people I am speaking with. If it looks like they are straining to hear me, I speak up. If their eyes widen and they push back from the table, I am likely speaking too loud. Lastly, I inform close friends and family to let me know if I am too loud or too soft. Finally, I have been taking advantage of the multi-talker network of the Roger system. Basically, with the Roger Pen and Clip Mics, I can have up to ten microphones working together in a wireless network. If I am going out for dinner with another couple, I will bring four Roger microphones with me and wear one of the microphones myself. This greatly helps me hear my own voice better in a noisy environment.

Inconsistent Hearing Behaviours

Sometimes I hear you, sometimes I don't. The inconsistencies are likely due to varying noise levels. In a face-to-face situation in a quiet room I hear quite well. BUT THE WORLD IS A REALLY NOISY PLACE. I would say that I find myself in an ideal listening environment at best about 10% of the time. The other 90% of the time, the noise levels severely impact my ability to communicate.

What To Do About It?

This is why I have been using my wireless Roger system so diligently. I cannot imagine how I could function without this technology.

Step on People's Feet behind Me

I did this to my wife the other day, leading to a painful bruise on her foot. I was playing with Flora, my hearing ear dog, and took a step backwards. Unbeknownst to me, my wife was standing right behind me without her shoes on. I crushed her foot terribly. This happens because I do not always hear people coming up behind me. In grocery stores, people often get grumpy if they say, "excuse me" from behind, but I don't respond.

What To Do About It?

I need to look behind me at all times before taking a step backwards. And my wife needs to give me a wide berth or else suffer painful consequences. In grocery stores, I try to make sure I move to the side of the aisle to ensure I am not blocking the way.