

Canadian Audiologist

The Official Publication of the Canadian Academy of Audiology

The World's Shortest Audiology Course (Delivered by a Client)

Gael Hannan

Published September 10, 2015

Hearing care professionals believe they know what people need in order to hear better. After all, they've gone to school to learn how to deliver it.

People with hearing loss (PWHL) *know* they want to hear better, but believe they don't always get what they *need* from the professionals. And, after all, they're the ones struggling to hear.

What's the answer? Maybe we've made it too complicated and divisive; perhaps the professional and the PWHL should hold hands for a little while when they come together.



In Robert Fulghum's iconic book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, he drills down streams of philosophy about how to achieve success and happiness with elemental credos such as *play fair, clean up your own mess, and take naps*. Reading them, you realize that the simple truths

are often the answers to the big questions, especially when they are presented in the Big Picture. *“Yeah, problems really do get solved when we hold hands and stick together!”*

Sometimes we just need to simplify things. Of course, it helps if you know what you’re talking about which, in our case, is hearing health care delivered by audiologists and hearing instrument specialists. I’ve been receiving these services for a lifetime; after 40 years of hearing aids and 20 years of advocacy, I’ve got a pretty good idea of what’s what. I think.

When I give presentations to university and college students training to be hearing care professionals, I’m there as a real, live PWHL. The students are motivated, intelligent people looking forward to a satisfying career that will help people and pay the bills. They have learned their profession’s scope of practice and intend to honor it. In my various presentations, I try humor and drama, PowerPoints, promises and thinly veiled threats to help them get under the skin of the person living with hearing loss. How much of it sticks in the shock of the real world with fee schedules that don’t include the necessary client counseling, and corporate pressure to *sell*?

Does the course need to be more elemental, more elemental? Next time, I should deliver the World’s Shortest Audiology Course.

1. Close your computers, please and look at me while we talk. Your clients will need the same courtesy. I’ll follow up with a print or electronic version; you should do the same for your clients after every appointment.
2. Paint the Big Picture for your clients. The journey to communication success is a partnership and you both have roles. Explain yours and explain your vision of theirs. Ask if they have a different vision. Come to an agreement. Write it down, spit in your hands, and shake.
3. Learn all the technical stuff about audiology and technology. Then, articulate the important bits to your clients. Neither dumb it down nor Einstein it. Keep it real.
4. Communicate better. Even if people say you already speak well, improve. Learn what your clients need and then deliver.
 - Face them when you speak. Always. No exceptions.
 - Speak clearly, maybe a bit louder, don’t over-emphasize. What your eyes say is as important as what your lips say.

Practice in front of a mirror and with a PWHL. Ask for feedback professors and friends. *Am I loud enough (but not too loud)? Do I speak clearly?*

5. Don’t assume. Ask questions. It’s easy to believe, by virtue of your diploma, that you’re the expert on what your client should want. How can you be? You’re not *them*. Ask about what’s important in their life. How has hearing loss affected their life? What would they like to see changed? Can they afford standard hearing aids? Be a scientist and never lose your curiosity. Explore alternatives. Be patient.
6. Walk in your clients’ shoes. Learn what *they* must—other communication strategies that complement technology. Become artificially hard of hearing for a day or two to understand the challenges in understanding speech, hearing your baby cry or coping in noise and groups. Use closed captioning for a month. Take a speechreading course. Use an amplification device for an explosive revelation at what your clients really endure as they get used to new hearing aids.

7. Loop your office. The whole thing. The front reception desk and the client interview/fitting rooms—but not the sound booth. Then—use a transmitter to connect with your client.
8. Of course, to do that, you will need to put telecoils in your clients' hearing aids. Explain why they need them and how the system works. Bluetooth is wonderful, connecting clients to their phones, TV and other devices. Telecoils and looping connect them to YOU.
9. Compliment your clients on their achievements, however small, and encourage them through the setbacks. Smile and make them want to smile back.

You may ask, in fairness, *“If you want us to walk a mile in your shoes, how about lacing up our runners for an hour or so?”* I would, except that science is my weak link; my explanation for how hearing aids work: *you put a battery in it.*

But you have *chosen* to be hearing health care professionals and I did *not* choose to have hearing loss. However, I have chosen you to help me.

Those of you who are still looking me in the eye, who haven't been sneak-peeking at their tweets—congratulations, you've passed the course. Good luck, we need you out there!

Oh, and when you shake your client's hand? Hold on to it just a little bit longer.