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Your Client's Partner is 'Hearing'. How Can You Help?

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I recently wrote an article for HearingHealthMatters.org called "I Have Hearing Loss. My Partner Doesn't. Help!"

It became one of my best-read articles ever, mainly, I think, because the title pinpointed a problem common to people with hearing loss. Or at least, those who live with partners who are hearing (defined as someone who *doesn't* require amplification, implants, captioning, or clear speech and can tell what direction a sound is coming from). I'm redoing that article here – but from your point of view, the hearing professional.

I have hearing loss and my husband doesn't. I refer to him in my work as the Hearing Husband, because he does both parts of that title so well. If you meet him, you can call him Doug, because that's his name.

Many or most of us people with hearing loss (PWHL) *love* having a hearing person – whatever their relationship to us – in our lives to fill in the gaps of what we don't hear or understand. But I wonder if the reverse is also true: a hearing person *loves* having a PWHL in their lives so that they can be interrupted in almost activity for requests of "what did he say", be constantly reminded to speak-up-face-me-don't-mumble, and frustrated demands to take over a phone call with the hydro

company because the customer service rep on the other end of the line is not understandable.

The hearing person must also decide what's worse – discreetly reminding your PWHL to stop bluffing in a group (and risk an angry response) or helplessly watching your loved one become isolated in the fast-flowing talk between friends.

In addition, the hearing partner feels like he or she is walking on unexploded landmines because it's so easy to *forget* and unwittingly break any of the million rules that must be followed. *Always get my attention. Face me. Repeat what you said without rolling your eyeballs. Help me, dammit!* When the hearing partner breaks a rule, the PWHL becomes hurt or angry or frustrated and sometimes they let it go with a gentle reminder. But the hearing partner never knows how it's going to end.

What can you, the hearing professional, do to help minimize the marital stress in mixed-hearing relationships? I wish I had an easy answer for you – but if I did, you would know about it already.

Perhaps the easiest way is to invite your client's partner to at least one of your client's appointments with you. That's when you paint a picture for them of what life with hearing loss may mean – the benefits of your client's new hearing aids and also the new bumps that may come up along the road to harmony and better hearing.

So many people with hearing loss don't know how, or have the words, to describe the impact of their hearing loss. And perhaps not surprisingly, it's even harder to be patient with the person they love the most. Sometimes we project our worse selves on to that person, although we don't want to.

I have often asked the Hearing Husband about how he feels about living with me and my profound hearing loss (read What the Hearing Husband Really Thinks). In his tactful way, he says it's all part of life together. But even though we've had 30 years of togetherness, there isn't a day that we don't have some hearing-related incident. When he shows irritation at a request to face me, etc., I try to remember that he's usually just annoyed at himself for forgetting. If I get irritable with him, it's almost always because of my own frustrations with hearing loss, not him.

He has been my cheerleader through my hearing loss life, new hearing aids, frequent trips away from home for conferences or speaking engagements, writing deadlines and, most notably, getting a cochlear implant two years ago. The only tough part was that nobody told him he'd have to remove the stitches from my head.

I'm lucky to have such a good Hearing Husband and, with a little extra counseling time and referrals to written and internet resources, you can help your client turn a grumpy partner into an understanding Hearing Spouse.