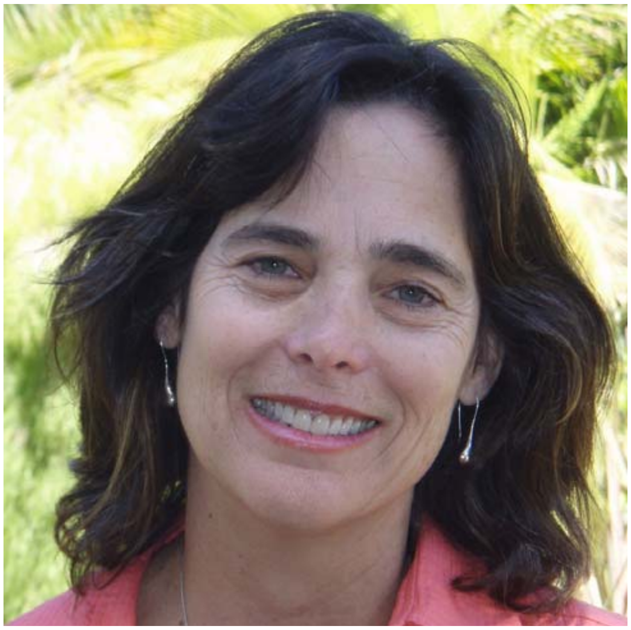
How to deal with the Emotional Aspects of Hearing Loss



By Alison Freeman

Alison Freeman, PhD, is a clinical psychologist who works half time at California State University at Northridge with both hearing and hard of hearing students. She also has a private practice and is particularly excited about doing videotherapy. She has had a severe hearing loss since early childhood, was orally trained and is a long-time member of HLAA. She has developed mental health service programs in several counties and did her post-doctorate fellowship at UCSF Center on Deafness. She recently spoke at the California Psychological Association on ***"Hearing Loss across the Lifespan: Unique Issues for Therapists Working with People who have Hearing Loss".*** *She is passionate about her work as a psychologist and is honored to be a role model for others, as she wished she had had as a child.* ***www.dralisonfreeman.net***

When we talk to someone who is wearing glasses, we don't give any thought to what it is that they need in order to see. Vision is easily measured in finite numbers like 20/100, whereas hearing loss is very complex with a multitude of factors and variations such as frequency, pitch, discrimination and volume.

A person who wears glasses doesn't need to explain their vision impairment, whereas a person who has a hearing loss has an invisible disability that is often vague even when described. Even if we show or wear our hearing aids visibly, this ambiguity is a daily stress that one has to continually adjust to with every person, place or situation throughout the day.

The primary disability of hearing loss is a communication disability rather than just not being able to hear. Struggling to understand conversations, music or professional meetings is a constant stress everyday. An essential part of dealing with hearing loss is recognizing that stress is inevitable. The task is to learn more effective stress management and communication skills which will be much more productive and emotionally satisfying.

There are different emotional challenges between those that have early childhood hearing loss and those that have adventitious loss. Often, the child deals much more with isolation and loneliness, whereas the adult who experiences loss deals with grieving for what they once had. The emotional process and journey leading to acceptance of one's hearing loss is often fraught with denial, anger, grief, frustration, depression, loneliness and finally acceptance. All of these emotions produce stress.

One of the major factors in effective stress management is being able to recognize when we can be in charge and knowing what we can and cannot control. When we educate others about our needs, we take charge and in doing so, we help minimize stress for ourselves as well as others.

I have found two basic assumptions to underlie my communication philosophy. Firstly, I assume that most people know little, if anything about hearing loss. Secondly, most of these people are embarrassed about asking me for what I need in order to communicate. They often think that they should know what I need but they really don't and that is embarrassing for them.

I view my role as that of an educator. I believe that the more people know and understand about my hearing loss, the more effective communication will be for everyone involved. When I can provide information to them, I often spare them the embarrassment of having to ask me for what I need. When I do this, I not only lower their stress but mine as well!

When I work as a psychologist at California State University at Northridge or in my private practice, I have a standard spiel whenever I meet a hearing client for the first time. It goes something like this: "Hi. Before we start, I would like to tell you that I have a hearing loss and what that means is that I both hear and lipread. So, if during the course of our conversation, you are not sure I heard you correctly, please don't be shy in telling me so. Likewise, I may ask you to repeat something if I am not sure that I understood you." When I first started doing this, I felt awkward, as if I were taking up their time with my problem because I thought they were there to talk about their problems, not mine! On the rare occasion when I sense that s/he is uncomfortable, I will add, "I will understand that if you are not comfortable with this, I would be happy to give you a referral to see someone else ".

For many people with hearing loss, embarrassment and a sense of shame prevents them from telling others about their hearing loss which often results in giving the wrong impression, i.e. being rude or "stupid". However, if one stops to really think about it, in not addressing your needs, you are really creating your worst fears. So, the question is "which would you rather be seen as, stupid/rude or hard of hearing or deaf?

When people do seem rude, critical or harsh to us, it helps to not take things so personally when we realize that it is probably more a reflection of their own emotional state, i.e. they have someone in their life, a parent, a spouse or a boss who is overly critical of them.

Often, one difficulty in telling others about our hearing loss may lie in making a distinction between the fine line between being assertive and the fear of being aggressive. While being assertive may be easier for people who are extraverted, it helps to remember that when we are not assertive, many erroneous assumptions and / or embarrassing mistakes can be made, and we do end up looking stupid, aloof, rude, etc. Donald Robertson, in his book, ***Build Your Resilience***, beautifully explains: **“Assertive behavior promotes equality in human relationships, enabling us to act on our own best interests, to stand up for ourselves without undue anxiety, to express feelings honestly and comfortably, and to exercise our personal rights without denying the rights of others."**

The journey to acceptance is one where we recognize our sense of control, and over time gradually feel “more and more okay” about not being in control. It doesn’t mean I have to like it but it is a fact of life. It helps to keep in mind what I call “***the three A’s,*** that we do have choices. In doing so, we can reduce our feelings of powerlessness, victimization or self-pity. The three A’s are AVOID, ALTERNATIVE and/or ACCEPT.

For example, when I am invited to go to a restaurant, I recognize that I may not be able to control the acoustics of a room because of the hardwood floors or the background music, but I can definitely take charge of communicating my needs. I can choose to “beg off” and ***avoid*** going altogether. I could suggest an ***alternative*** of going to a quieter restaurant or to go at an earlier time when it is not so noisy. Or I can just ***accept*** that I will be uncomfortable because it is important for me to be there for a friend or relative’s birthday. Likewise, if I am invited to go to a movie, I can ***avoid*** it, suggest an ***alternative*** going to a captioned movie (isn’t technology wonderful?) or just ***accept*** that I will not understand everything. I choose to save my energy for when it is very important and have learned not to “sweat the small stuff”.

While having a hearing loss is certainly annoying and uncomfortable at times, **I have learned that the more I take responsibility for communicating my needs the more comfortable and less problematic my hearing loss becomes.** Ultimately, the journey of accepting one’s hearing loss is a gradual and continual process.

No-Bluff Pledge

By Gael Hannon

I have the RIGHT to understand and participate.
In my life, I will not bluff!
I will not pretend to understand when I do *not*
Instead I will do all that it takes to engage, interact and communicate!
I will reclaim my life. Ban the bluff.