

Improving Understanding with Communication Strategies (What to do when you don't understand)

This material is based upon two HOPE Online seminars by the same name

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Hear now. And always



For adults who receive cochlear implants, hearing rehabilitation is an important part of auditory progress with the device. Hearing rehabilitation programs take on various areas of focus including: communication strategies, family support and training, environmental sound identification, auditory training, music therapy, telephone training, advocacy, and use of assistive listening devices. Unfortunately counseling and training in the use of communication strategies is often overlooked.

To understand the importance of communication strategies training, we should first examine the factors that influence understanding during conversation. These factors can be assigned to three categories as related to: the Speaker, the Environment, and the Listener. The following chart lists some common factors that influence understanding related to each category. Reflect on this list to determine which factors in each category are within the control of the conversation participants.

SPEAKER	ENVIRONMENT	LISTENER
<input type="checkbox"/> Accent	<input type="checkbox"/> Lights too dim	<input type="checkbox"/> Not interested in topic
<input type="checkbox"/> Looks away	<input type="checkbox"/> Glare from lights	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling ill/tired
<input type="checkbox"/> Hand covering mouth or on face	<input type="checkbox"/> Visual distractions	<input type="checkbox"/> HA/Speech Processor set incorrectly
<input type="checkbox"/> Mumbling	<input type="checkbox"/> Auditory distractions	<input type="checkbox"/> Being passive
<input type="checkbox"/> Too loud/too soft	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor acoustics/high ceilings/echo	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-confidence
<input type="checkbox"/> Facial hair	<input type="checkbox"/> Room ventilation	<input type="checkbox"/> Distracting thoughts
<input type="checkbox"/> Mannerisms/gestures	<input type="checkbox"/> Angle of vision	<input type="checkbox"/> Level of hearing loss
<input type="checkbox"/> Facial expressions	<input type="checkbox"/> Availability of Assistive Listening Devices (ALDs)	<input type="checkbox"/> Motivation to hear
<input type="checkbox"/> Too fast/too slow	<input type="checkbox"/> Distance	<input type="checkbox"/> Emotional state
<input type="checkbox"/> Chewing gum or food	<input type="checkbox"/> Rooms without furniture, carpeting, items on walls	<input type="checkbox"/> Speechreading ability
<input type="checkbox"/> Exaggerating lip movements	<input type="checkbox"/> Outside setting is dark and noisy with crickets	<input type="checkbox"/> Use of strategies

For example, we may be able to ask a speaker who is speaking too softly to speak louder, we may be able to improve lighting that is affecting communication and we may be able to dismiss distracting thoughts and improve our focus when listening. As listeners, the willingness to use communication strategies is firmly within our grasp in any one situation. Several of these factors may be “in play” at once.

Three Communication Styles: Know Yours

Passive: Most people with hearing loss exhibit this communication style. Passive Communicators isolate themselves by avoiding situations in which they fear they will not be able to communicate well. Often passive communicators withdraw from conversations. When they do participate, they may pretend that they understand by limiting their responses to a nod (because of fear that they may have misheard and a more meaningful response may be inappropriate thus causing them to feel foolish). They perceive it as “easier” to be passive. Because of passivity, people with hearing loss often miss out on social opportunities and vocational opportunities. Their needs may not be met.

Aggressive: This style is the opposite of the passive style. Aggressive Communicators may take over conversations in order to avoid having to work to understand their communication partner. They perceive any communication difficulties as being the speaker's fault rather than noting their own responsibility in the conversation. A person with an aggressive communication style may ignore a speaker in order to force him/her to repeat. Because they trample on the needs of others, aggressive communicators are not often well received.

Assertive: Assertive Communicators are not afraid to disclose their hearing loss when necessary. They respect their communication partners by asking for, rather than demanding, help in communication. They are not afraid to use communication strategies or to advocate for themselves. Assertive communicators get their needs met.

Why be an Assertive Communicator?

- Everyone has times when they don't understand
- We are judged by our communication abilities
- Those with normal hearing don't know how to help
- Being passive results in misunderstandings and missed opportunities
- Misunderstanding and missed opportunities result in feelings of isolation, sadness and inadequacy

The goal of **Communication Strategies Training** is to develop skills that will help us to handle difficult communication situations assertively and independently. Training is necessary because people with hearing loss and their families rarely develop effective communication and coping skills without training and practice.

Six Steps to Improved Understanding with Communication Strategies

1. Answering the question: "How do I see myself?"
2. Explaining your cochlear implant
3. Stage-managing the environment
4. Identifying current strategies used
5. Experimenting with new strategies
6. Phrasing for optimal results

1. Answering the question "How do I see myself?"

Consider how you see yourself in terms of your hearing loss. Do you self-identify with the terms "deaf", "Deaf", "hard-of-hearing" "hearing impaired" or do you "have a hearing loss?" Understanding how you self identify will help you to communicate your needs with others.

2. Explaining your cochlear implant

Script a one to two sentence description of the device that you use to hear. This wording will be helpful when you ask a new conversation partner to use communication strategies.

3. Stage-managing the environment

Spend time thinking about the various settings in which you have difficulty communicating. Consider positioning in each situation that would help you to best communicate; seating in a restaurant, positioning in a lecture hall, and favorite spot at a dinner party. Think as well about what accommodations you are willing to request in each situation (e.g., a sound system in your place of worship, preferred seating at performances). Recognize that the choices you make will effect how well you understand in each environment.

4. Identifying current strategies used

Most often, people with hearing loss rely on asking speakers to repeat as their primary strategy to repair communication breakdown. However, most often this request is posed indirectly; for example, by saying "Huh?", "Beg your pardon?" or something similar. These strategies are non-specific and have been shown to be the *least* successful communication repair strategies, because speakers most often do nothing to change the manner in which they communicated the first time.

5. Experimenting with new strategies

More effective than asking someone to repeat would be to use a very specific request that asks the speaker to do something particular to change his or her communication. For example:

- "Can you lower your hand so that I can speechread?"
- "Can we move into the light so that I can see your face?"
- "What is the key word in what you were saying?"

Because people with normal hearing do not know how to respond when those with hearing loss do not understand, these specific requests tell them *how* to help and take away the awkwardness of this situation.

No one strategy works best for everyone. As a cochlear implant recipient, you are encouraged to try new strategies in different situations and with different people. Keep track of those that you have tried. From there, note those that work for you and those that don't and in what situations.

6. Phrasing for optimal result

Five ingredients for a successful request

- Use "I" statements. Do not blame others
- Make a specific request
- Explain why you are making the request
- Be courteous
- Express your gratitude

A simple request can contain the first two points. Try this carrier phrase initially:

"I can (hear, understand, lipread) you better if....."

From there, begin to use more sophisticated requests incorporating the final three points. It is important to explain *why* the request is being made because those with normal hearing don't know what to do. For example, they may not know that a person with a cochlear implant might read lips. Never assume that others understand your hearing loss. This might be the perfect opportunity to use your identity phrase to explain (e.g., "I have a cochlear implant, but I still have trouble hearing at distance from a speaker.").

It's critical to be courteous – the speaker will feel good about your request and therefore more likely to comply. Being grateful increases the chances that the speaker will remember how they can help and they will be more likely to help the next time.

Examples

- Instead of "Your hand is in the way" try "Excuse me (name), I could lipread you better if you would please lower your hand".
- Instead of "It's too noisy in here" try "My cochlear implant helps me understand a lot better, but I still have trouble in noise – would you mind moving to a table away from the piano?".
- Instead of "You are all speaking too softly" try "I think my implant processor needs adjustment; can you please wait a moment while I change the setting? Thank you for waiting; I really want to hear what you have to say".

Communication Strategies

These strategies apply to family members. Using them will help both of you to be less frustrated.

1. Clear Speech

"Clear Speech" is when the speaker attempts to express every word and sentence in a precise, accurate and fully formed manner. Use of "Clear Speech" will improve understanding up to 20%. When we ask people to speak more slowly, speech will automatically become clearer. In fact, asking someone to speak more "slowly" is preferable to asking them to speak more "clearly" so as not to suggest that their speech was previously sloppy. Often this request is enough for some family members, but others will need reminders to continue speaking slowly as their tendency will be to gradually speed back up. If needed, model for others what you mean by clear speech and be prepared to model how not to speak if necessary. For example: "Please (pause) speak (pause) to (pause) me (pause) more (pause) like (pause) this" instead of "Doooo NOOOOOT feel liiiiiiiiike youuuuuu haaaaave toooo eXXXaaaaaageraaate"

Talk with your family members and frequent communication partners about some key phrases that will add to clear speech techniques. For example, suggest using these helpers:

- "I think" when stating an opinion or making suggestions
- "Now I want to talk about something else" when changing the subject
- "What can I do to help you understand?" to make sure that you are taking responsibility for communication repair

2. Anticipatory Strategies

Before entering a communication situation, think about who will be there and what might be said. Depending on the situation, try the following:

- Read about current events and movies
- Obtain agendas before meetings in advance
- Read the text before a subject is discussed in class
- Obtain the synopsis of a play or movie before going to see it
- Ask someone the topic before entering a conversation
- Review names of dinner and cocktail party guests before arriving

Once you have anticipated possible vocabulary, dialogue and names for a particular situation, practice speechreading those words with your spouse or conversation partner.

3. Repair Strategies

Try these once problems occur within a communication situation:

a. Change environments

The biggest enemies for those with hearing loss are poor lighting, background noise and poor acoustics. As a listener, it will be in your interest to optimize the environment for conversation. For example, say "I'd love to hear what you have to say, but I'm having trouble here – would you mind if we moved to the corner of the room?"

b. Ask the speaker to get your attention

By asking others to call your name before speaking, their voice will be directed toward you and you will be ready to lipread

c. Ask the speaker to face you when speaking

Even once a speaker has gotten your attention, they may need to be reminded to look at you so that you can lipread and so that optimal volume is maintained. Try "(Name), I lip read best when I can see your face straight on. Thank you."

d. Ask the speaker to speak at a normal loudness level

The cochlear implant should be able to provide the appropriate loudness. When others speak loudly, speech is distorted and the CI user gets a confusing experience with loudness. Try saying "My implant makes speech loud enough for me. Thank you for trying to help me, but you can speak normally".

e. Guess

People with hearing loss are often reluctant to guess for fear of getting it wrong and looking silly. However, they are more often correct than they would think. Don't be afraid to guess but remember that it is critical to repeat the guess so that the speaker can confirm it as correct or incorrect.

f. Check/Confirm what you have heard

Check what you have heard by saying: "Did you say....?" Use this strategy even if you got very little and even if you think it seems silly. Especially on the phone, it is essential that key details of a message are precisely understood. When you use this confirmation strategy, the speaker will feel as if you are really trying to understand them and will be more likely to continue the conversation.

g. Ask the speaker to repeat slower

This is the single most effective strategy. If a speaker is asked for a simple repetition, they will most likely repeat exactly the way they spoke the first time. If they do make changes, it will likely be to speak louder or to exaggerate their lip movements—neither of which is helpful. Instead, be specific by asking that the speaker repeat more slowly. If you still misunderstand, ask the speaker to say it in a different way.

h. Ask for the topic or key word

Communication is more effective when the topic is known. It is easier to predict what will be said next when a topic or key word of a conversation has been stated. Say, for example, "I am not able to understand what you are saying. Can you tell me the subject please?"

i. Ask the speaker to rephrase

This is an effective, but underused, strategy. Many times when a speaker is asked to rephrase, she automatically chooses words that are easier to hear and/or speechread. This is a more effective strategy than a repetition. Try "I didn't follow what you said; could you please say that a different way?"

j. Ask the speaker to simplify or shorten the sentence

A simple, short sentence is much easier to understand than a long, detailed one. Shorter sentences allow the listener to jump in and confirm information before the speaker moves on to the next sentence. This is especially helpful on the telephone.

k. Ask the speaker to spell a word

Be aware when using this strategy that understanding the spelling of a word may involve difficult-to-speechread letters or those that sound similar. In those cases, use the "code word strategy" to clarify. For example say "Did you say 'p' as in 'potato'?" This is a familiar strategy to many though it may need to be modeled for some.

l. Ask the speaker to use gestures

It may clarify speech if a speaker uses gestures at the same time. Helpful gestures include nodding, shaking the head, raising the arms to indicate "I don't know", or specific gestures like pointing to a watch to indicate "time".

m. Ask to have it written down

As a last resort, carry a notepad so that if you do not understand a message you can ask to have it written down. This strategy always works!

4. Dealing with the Expectations of Others

Often family members and friends have unrealistic expectations of what a cochlear implant can do for a person with hearing loss. It will be important to deal with these misunderstandings head on by sharing before and after examples of challenging situations and by sharing examples of things that are still difficult for you to hear or do. Discuss with your friends and family the ways that they can assist you when communicating; which strategies work best and which do not work. Reassure them that it is ok to ask you how best to help by saying "How can I help you to understand?"

Tips to Go

Specific Strategies for Approaching Common Environments

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Following are tips for approaching some commonly difficult communication situations.

Restaurants

Eating out in a restaurant can be a daunting experience for a person with a cochlear implant due to the many challenges that such an environment presents. However, there are many strategies that will help you to approach this situation with assurance so that you can enjoy time with family and friends or confidently participate in business gatherings.

The challenges that a restaurant presents fall into four main categories: noise, lighting, seating and acoustics. Consider each:

- Noise – The sources of noise in a restaurant are many: the kitchen, the bar, people talking, music, street noise, heating and cooling equipment, and decorative elements such as fountains and fish tanks.
- Lighting – restaurants often attempt a certain ambiance provided by recessed lighting, side lighting, candles, and lowered overhead lighting. These various sources can create shadows or glare that make lipreading difficult.
- Seating – There are a variety of seating choices available in restaurants, some being better than others for creating a good listening environment.
- Acoustics – Current trends seem to call for restaurants to have bare tables, bare windows, bare floors and bare ceilings which create a very reverberant atmosphere.

Planning Ahead

Investing the time to visit a restaurant ahead of time can pay off with an improved dining experience. Such a visit will allow you to look at the seating that is available and the lighting and acoustic elements that may cause difficulty for you so that you will have strategies in place to address these issues. Other tips:

- Collect menus to prepare yourself for the vocabulary that will be used in ordering
- Avoid places with live music
- Choose places with tablecloths, curtains and carpeting. Be aware that these spots may be among the most expensive
- Get to know the management in your favorite spots to facilitate seating requests or other requested changes
- Plan to dine outside of peak hours to avoid the noisiest times

As you visit a number of places, you will be able to gradually build a list of preferred establishments so that you have fewer surprises and more enjoyable evenings.

At the Restaurant

Once you arrive, be prepared with strategies to assist yourself with communication throughout the event. Consider these tips:

Select an appropriate table:

- If in a smaller group, ask for a booth as it provides a better listening environment than an open table
- For larger groups, a round table will allow you to see the faces of most other diners

Positioning

- Position yourself with your back against a wall so as to reduce the noise coming from that direction
- Seat yourself next to the person with whom you will speak the most or with your “best ear” in the direction that you will hear the most
- Don't be afraid to pick the best seat for yourself and to tell the other diners why you have done so

Menu

- Be prepared for questions about food preparation. For example, if you are ordering steak, expect that the server will ask how you'd like it cooked
- Ask for specials to be presented in writing
- Have a buddy prepared to repeat the specials or other information from the wait staff as necessary

Outside of these strategies, realize that an assistive listening device might be very suitably used in a restaurant situation. Work with your audiologist to determine the best type for your use. If you use a type that does not plug directly into your processor, the microphone may be placed in the center of the table. The “Lazy-Susan” found on many large tables, particularly in Chinese restaurants, can be conveniently used to turn the microphone toward each speaker as necessary.

In the Car

Considering strategies for communicating in the car can be quite tricky because of the number of possible situations that may be encountered. For example the person with hearing loss may be the driver of one or many people, or may be the only passenger or one of many. Regardless of the situation at hand, safety of all persons must be the primary consideration and therefore essential communication must take precedence over social communication. To achieve this, consider the following:

Navigation Tools

- GPS systems with spoken instructions may be helpful, but the volume levels are not always sufficient for some listeners
- Having a passenger write directions in large letters on an erasable board can be helpful. The passenger should hold the sign approximately 12 inches in front of the driver.

Good listening environment

- Turn off the radio
- Keep windows up and heating/cooling fans low
- Have a signal (e.g., a raised hand) to indicate the need for quiet time to avoid distraction
- Explain these necessities to passengers before the trip begins

Other considerations

- Before a long trip, meet with your audiologist to ensure that you have a noise program that works well for you. This program will be ideal for use in the car.
- Use an assistive listening device. Clip the microphone to the back of the front seat to allow for listening to rear passengers
- Make sure to select a cell phone that is compatible with hearing aid or cochlear implant use. The labeling should read M3 or M4 to indicate low levels of interference with microphone setting or T3 or T4 for telecoil use.
- A flashlight could aid in lipreading when traveling at night
- A right angle rear view mirror assists with lipreading those in the rear seats

When planning a trip, it is effective to consider communication strategies ahead of time. Set the communication ground rules, including

- When it is ok and when it is not ok to talk (e.g., ok during long stretches of highway, but not when directions are needed)
- Which gestures might be helpful to include when giving directions (e.g., holding up fingers for the number of turns to take)
- A system of specific questions that allow for yes/no answers. If necessary, also discuss a system of conveying yes/no in a manner that is easy for the person with hearing loss to perceive (e.g., "Yes" versus "No No")
- Guidelines for conversation such as one person talking at a time, identifying the speaker, no eating/drinking while speaking etc.

In short, it is recommended that a driver with hearing loss make sure to be the person "in the driver's seat" with regard to setting these ground rules, planning the seating arrangements to maximize communication, and determining when communication must be restricted to safety and navigation and when socializing is acceptable. With these strategies in place, every journey can be a pleasant experience.

Exercises

1. *Ask your family to pay attention to what strategies you use and to let you know then and there what they've noticed. Awareness is the first step to changing behavior*
2. *Complete the Challenging Situation Description & Blueprint form for a listening situation that you commonly find difficult. Be as specific as possible. Take the form to your audiologist on your next appointment. Discuss together how you can make that situation better next time.*

Hear now. And always

This is the Cochlear promise to you. As the global leader in hearing solutions, Cochlear is dedicated to bringing the gift of sound to people all over the world. With our hearing solutions, Cochlear has reconnected over 200,000 cochlear implant and Baha® users to their families, friends and communities in more than 100 countries.

Along with the industry's largest investment in research and development, we continue to partner with leading international researchers and hearing professionals, ensuring that we are at the forefront in the science of hearing.

For the person with hearing loss receiving any one of the Cochlear hearing solutions, our commitment is that for the rest of your life we will be here to support you. Hear now. And always

For further information please contact your local Cochlear representative or visit us on the web at: www.CochlearAmericas.com

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