
Content Brief: Effective Communication Strategies for Seniors with Hearing Loss Brief

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Senior Care Professionals: Improving Communication with Seniors who Have Hearing Loss

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By Laurie Orlov

When it comes to caring for the aging population in the United States, senior care professionals encounter individuals with hearing loss every day in their work.

In a recent cohort study of a nationally representative sample of 2803 older adults, 65.3% (representing 21.5 million individuals) of those aged 71 years or older had hearing loss, and by age 90 years, 96.2% of adults had hearing loss. However, only 29.2% of those with hearing loss used hearing aids.ⁱ Given that the average age of seniors in assisted living is 84 (87 in skilled nursing facilities) it is safe to say that at least two-thirds of them have hearing loss.ⁱⁱ ⁱⁱⁱ Even worse, while 73% of senior care professionals say that many of their residents need assistance with their hearing aids, only about 10% of the professionals say they know enough about their patients' hearing aids to be helpful.^{iv}

Knowing the characteristics of senior living residents and their hearing assistive devices, however, is not enough. It's important to understand the characteristics of workers as well— for whom overall annual turnover in the senior living industry is now at 85%.^v These statistics imply that there are many senior care professionals working in the field who could

benefit from greater understanding of the many benefits of hearing aids, as well as the appropriate use of (or management of) hearing aids.

It is also known that untreated hearing loss results in increased social isolation and other health issues, including dementia and increased fall risk.^{vi} Meanwhile, increased engagement of staff who care for residents is a key recommendation made to reduce turnover.^{vii} One way to do so is to provide better training in the field they have chosen. With better training, the possibilities of advancement could (and should) grow.

A consideration for those charged with training senior care staff: Do workers even understand hearing loss and its myriad impacts? Do they have the right toolkit of communication approaches to do the best job they can with them? Do senior care organizations train newly hired workers in these approaches or offer refresher training reminders (even online tutorials) to ensure that residents with hearing loss are treated with respect and engaged as much as possible in the day-to-day life of their communities?

Providing senior care professionals with communication strategies while caring for their residents who have hearing loss is a critical skill set — and one that can be enhanced with a few simple tips.

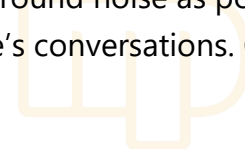
9 Tips to Improve Communication with Seniors who Have Hearing Loss

1) Get Their Attention

Respectfully get the senior's attention before speaking. Polite ways to do so include stepping into their line of sight, calmly waving a hand in their direction, or lightly tapping on their shoulder. Try not to startle the person, though.

2) Reduce Background Noise

Eliminate as much background noise as possible, including music, television sounds and other people's conversations. Choosing quieter locations can help



minimize ambient noise and distractions while better facilitating communication.

3) Speak One at a Time

Conversations with multiple people are often challenging for someone with hearing loss to follow. In a group setting, such as a senior living community, try to make sure only one person talks at a time. Side conversations and talking over one another can make it confusing and overwhelming for someone with hearing loss.

4) Speak Clearly and Loudly

Face the person and enunciate while speaking, but don't exaggerate your speech. The same applies to your tone and voice volume. Some seniors with age-related hearing loss benefit from a speaker using a slightly raised voice, but don't shout. Be mindful to speak at a reasonable speed as well — not too fast but not too slowly either.

5) Repeat Yourself

When conversing with someone who has hearing loss, it's important to remember they may not fully comprehend what you've said on the first try. You might need to repeat yourself. If they seem confused, don't hesitate to ask if they've understood. When repeating, try using the exact same words and phrasing a couple of times. Exact repetition may help them piece together the entire thought you're expressing, whereas constantly changing what you're saying can be counterproductive and may make them doubt what they thought you said initially.

6) Rephrase Your Question or Statement

If repetition isn't serving either of you well, then take a shot at rephrasing what you're trying to convey. Try shortening and simplifying your question or statement and see if that helps.



7) **Appearances and Visual Cues Matter**

Proper lighting and visibility can help seniors with hearing loss use visual cues to better understand what is being said to them. Be sure to face the person directly while speaking and try to maintain normal eye contact. Even if they never studied lip-reading, they can gain a great deal of information by looking at the speaker's mouth, facial expressions and body language. Avoid obstructing the view of your mouth, looking around, eating, or chewing gum while conversing since this can interfere with their ability to hear or interpret what you're saying. Sometimes gestures can help get an idea across but be respectful and remember that miming is different from American Sign Language (ASL).

8) **Be Understanding**

Always exercise patience when conversing with someone with hearing loss. If you get frustrated, take a deep breath and consider how difficult the situation must be for them. As much as you want the person with hearing loss to hear what you have to say, remember that they also want to be able to listen, understand and participate in this exchange. Misunderstandings and awkward moments are bound to happen but try to keep things light and continue the interaction.

9) **Ask How They Prefer to Communicate**

Coping with hearing loss is often a cooperative effort. There are many different types and degrees of hearing loss. Each person has their own preferred means of effectively communicating, so don't hesitate to ask the person how you can help improve your interaction. If verbal communication is not successful, switch your approach. Try writing down what you want to say, using respectful gestures, or typing out your question or statement on your phone and showing it to the person.

Source: AgingCare^{viii}



As with other skills developed while working with seniors, these tactics need to be refreshed, and staff will need to be reminded periodically—and of course, these should always be noted in the orientation of newly hired senior care workers.

Considering the ubiquity of hearing loss among the aging population, the benefits of better communications between senior care professionals and those in their care cannot be understated. Employing these skills will lead to better understanding of any needs or health issues seniors may have while also building a better environment of trust and support for all stakeholders engaged in their care.

About the Author

Laurie M. Orlov, a tech industry veteran, writer and speaker is the founder of Aging and Health Technology Watch, providing thought leadership, analysis and guidance. Laurie spent many years in the technology industry, first as a CIO and then at analyst firm Forrester Research.

ⁱ Nicholas S. Reed et al. "Prevalence of Hearing Aid Use Among US Medicare Beneficiaries Aged 71 Years and Older" *Jama Network*, July, 2023

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ⁱⁱ "Assisted Living Demographics" *Haven Senior Investments*, 2023

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ⁱⁱⁱ "Assisted Living Demographics" *Haven Senior Investments*, 2023

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^{iv} Jorunn Solheim, et al., "Lack of ear care knowledge in nursing homes," *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare*, Sept., 2016

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^v "Senior Living: Looking for Workers? Tired of Turnover?" *NIC*, May 19, 2022

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^{vi} Alison Huang et al. "New Study Links Hearing Loss with Dementia in Older Adults" *Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health*, January, 2023

<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2023/new-study-links-hearing-loss-with-dementia-in-older-adults>

^{vii} "Building An Engaged Workforce" *Argentum Activated Insights* 2018

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^{viii} "How to Communicate with Hearing Impaired Elderly Loved Ones" *Aging Care*

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