

Audience: **Hearing healthcare professionals (Doctors of Audiology, Physician Assistants (PA), Practice Managers, Speech-Language Pathologist**

## **FOR HEARING PROFESSIONALS: TECH CAN REDUCE PATIENT ISOLATION**

Multiple research studies have linked social isolation of older adults with risk of poorer health outcomes.<sup>1</sup> The impact of social isolation is often cited in the national press as a societal issue.<sup>2</sup> According to a recent Leading Age/CAST whitepaper, about 13% of older adults report being often lonely, and 30% report that loneliness was sometimes an issue.<sup>3</sup> Socially isolated people are at increased risk of dementia.<sup>4</sup> How does this relate to hearing loss?

**As people age, the prevalence of hearing loss increases.** Consider that for every 10-decibel reduction (roughly equivalent to the sound of calm breathing) in hearing sensitivity, the odds of social isolation increase by 52%.<sup>5</sup> One-third of Americans between 65 and 74 have hearing loss, and for more than half of individuals aged 75+ that loss is significant. Most adults with significant hearing loss do not wear hearing aids and “only 20% of those individuals who might benefit from treatment actually seek help Most delay treatment until they cannot communicate even in the best of listening situations.”<sup>6</sup>

**Social isolation and loneliness is directly linked to inability to hear.**<sup>7</sup> A study of 2300 hearing impaired individuals sponsored by the National Council on Aging (NCOA) verifies the direct link between hearing loss, sadness, depression, and withdrawal from social situations.<sup>8</sup>

**Smartphone use for communication has been a game changer for those with hearing loss.**

For those with access to more sophisticated technologies, newer offerings may help mitigate social isolation by linking smartphone apps to hearing aids.<sup>9</sup> For example, users of specific smartphone apps may increase hearing aid sound level, or “use them as headphones to stream phone calls, YouTube videos, music, public lectures and concerts.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the growth in the number of smartphone apps, captioning apps and services are also available.<sup>11</sup> In the new

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world of hearables, smartphones are opening up social connections and helping to reduce the feelings of isolation for the hearing impaired.<sup>12</sup>

**For hearing professionals, help patients find the right apps to reduce their social isolation.**

To summarize, the relationship between hearing loss and multiple co-morbidities has been outlined by Harvey Abrams.<sup>13</sup> One of the co-morbidity associations with untreated hearing loss is social isolation. It is necessary but insufficient to treat hearing loss out of context of an individual's quality of life. Instead, hearing professionals need to view it as one aspect contributing to poorer health outcomes and isolation from family and friends. Professionals need to assess the technology literacy of patients -- and guide them to smartphone use and apps that can improve quality of life.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3625264/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/22/upshot/how-social-isolation-is-killing-us.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.leadingage.org/white-papers/social-connectedness-and-engagement-technology-long-term-and-post-acute-care-primer-and#3.1>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/healthy\\_aging/healthy\\_body/the-hidden-risks-of-hearing-loss](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/healthy_aging/healthy_body/the-hidden-risks-of-hearing-loss)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hearingreview.com/2016/06/undiagnosed-hearing-loss-seniors-means-isolation-study-finds/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.asha.org/articles/untreated-hearing-loss-in-adults/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hearusa.com/hearing-loss-facts.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.audiology.org/publications-resources/document-library/untreated-hearing-loss-linked-depression-social-isolation>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/health/2014/03/10/smartphone-apps-link-with-hearing-aids-to-improve-hearing-connect-with.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hearinglink.org/living/loops-equipment/useful-apps-for-hearing-loss/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.healthyhearing.com/report/47850-The-best-phone-captioning-apps-for-the-hearing-impaired>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.techradar.com/news/the-smartphone-is-changing-the-life-of-those-with-hearing-disabilities>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.hearingreview.com/2017/11/hearing-loss-associated-comorbidities-know/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.listenclear.com/the-top-apps-for-the-hard-of-hearing/>