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Hearing Loss: The Early Signs

IT MAY BE difficult to remember the first time you realized that you couldn't hear as well as you once did. Most hearing loss occurs gradually, so you may not even have noticed that it was happening. You could hear some people; you had difficulty hearing others. You could hear in some situations; in other situations, you had a problem hearing. These mixed signals are confusing and often prevent people from acknowledging a hearing loss. For this reason, a friend or family member is often the first person to notice that someone is losing their hearing. Below are some of the warning signs of early hearing loss:

- You hear but cannot understand.
- You ask people to repeat what they said or respond inappropriately to questions.
- You have difficulty understanding in restaurants, the car, and other noisy environments where several people are talking at the same time.
- You have difficulty hearing at the movies or in the theater.
- You have difficulty understanding in group or social situations.
- You can't understand your grandchildren or other young children.
- You hear better in one ear than in the other when you are on the telephone.
- You have dizziness, pain, or ringing in your ears.

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- You turn the television and radio volume louder than other people like.
- You have difficulty understanding speech if you can't see the speaker's face.
- You turn your head to one side to hear what is said.

In addition to observing the above signs, your family may notice the following:

- You have a blank expression on your face.
- You speak too loudly or too softly.
- You can't understand what is being said when someone speaks to you from another room.
- You avoid social situations.
- You tune out or fall asleep at group gatherings.

Denial

The average delay between the onset of hearing loss and seeking a professional diagnosis is five to seven years. One reason for this delay is not noticing the change in hearing in the early stages of acquired hearing loss. A more prevalent reason is failing to admit there is a problem or avoiding the problem. If you are in the denial stage, you may try to hide the loss because you perceive it as a sign of aging or carrying the stigma of a disability. You also may hide your hearing loss by not participating in conversations, by smiling when everyone else is doing so, and by bluffing in other ways. Denial is exacerbated by the fact that in some situations you can hear and in others you cannot, so you waver between acceptance and denial of the need for a hearing test. The hearing loss is often obvious to your family members and friends; however, if you are like most hard of hearing people, at first you may blame your problem on others.

It Doesn't Hurt

Since hearing loss is usually free of physical pain, people who are hard of hearing tend to put off dealing with it, especially if they are also experiencing other physical problems such as arthritis and heart disease. Although physically painless, hearing loss can cause you emotional pain since it can make you feel socially inept, isolated, embarrassed, even depressed. Poor hearing disrupts communication and can lead to unhappiness. It also can cause pain for your family and friends who may become frustrated and angry when trying to communicate with you (see chapter 4).

Getting Help: Make It a Priority

If listening situations are causing you to strain, tune out, or feel fatigued and irritable, it may be time to admit you have a hearing loss. If so, this is the time to see a hearing health care specialist to determine what the problem is. Some hearing losses may be medically or surgically correctable; most can be helped by wearing a hearing aid. Much information is available when you decide that doing something about your hearing loss is your top priority.

Maintaining good communication with your family and friends is vital to remaining happy, healthy, and in control of your life. It is especially important for older people. You owe it to yourself to have the best quality of life possible.