

Dealing with the Emotional Aspects of Hearing Loss

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“I Think I’m Hopeless, But I Could Be Wrong. A Guide to Building Self-Confidence”
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Of all your relationships, the most important is the one you have with yourself.

As a practicing psychologist who has hearing loss myself, I see that the most difficult part of hearing loss is not the loss of sound but the emotional burden it carries.

Hearing loss becomes a life problem and affects conversations, relationships, sense of identity, work, and social situations. It is not the missed sound that hurts but what the missed word means emotionally. It determines the constant effort to keep up, the fear of missing things, the embarrassment of misunderstanding, and the exhaustion of always having to work harder. While the emotional side doesn’t show up on an audiogram, it shows up in your day.

Hearing loss can contribute to anxiety, depression, loneliness, stress, social isolation, and more. It also affects behavior by avoiding restaurants, pulling back in group settings, speaking less, not asking for clarification, and withdrawal from social situations. Hearing loss affects daily functioning when you have difficulty with appointments, phone calls, public places, following instructions and in doctor’s waiting rooms.

Hearing loss changes the way you communicate. You must depend more on guesswork, context, visual cues, repetition, and coping strategies just to keep up. Communication becomes less natural and requires more effort. Conversation does not wait. By the time you figure out what was just said, the discussion may already have moved on.

Many people with hearing loss use poor coping strategies. One of the more common mechanisms is nodding as if you heard the conversation. Laughing along when you did not hear may look like you are participating, but emotionally it can feel like pretending. While staying quiet to avoid mistakes protects you from embarrassment in the moment, it shrinks your confidence and your presence in the conversation. These coping strategies are understandable, but they are not very helpful.

Most hearing loss materials emphasize medical and technical issues. This includes hearing tests, audiograms, hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other devices. The medical side surely matters, but it misses the human side of the experience. Most people are taught how to hear better, but not how to cope better, since emotional distress is much more difficult to quantify. The emotional burden is real, and it takes a psychological toll. Stress often becomes a constant background experience for people with hearing loss, who live with ongoing tension as they try to stay prepared and pay attention.

Many people assume that if you wear a hearing aid or cochlear implant, you can hear as well as they do. Hearing technology helps, but it does not create normal hearing. This is especially true in noisy places, group settings, or fast-moving conversations. People may speak from a different room, talk too quickly, or do not realize that background noise is a challenge. This misunderstanding can create unrealistic expectations. For example, a person may hear well one-on-one in a quiet room with a hearing aid or cochlear implant, but still struggle in a restaurant, a car, a meeting, or a family gathering. To others it may seem inconsistent, that you are not trying hard enough or that you're lazy.

Most people have no idea what you are hearing, and they respond accordingly. Many times, they respond in ways that are not helpful, saying things such as “turn up your hearing aid,” “you are not listening”, “never mind,” “but I am speaking clearly,” or “I just told you that already.” Some people have said that you are lucky with your hearing loss because you can turn your hearing aid off and not hear conversations that you don't like. Well, how often do you do that?

Your belief system can create emotional roadblocks. Beliefs are usually shaped by the stage of life you are in. In younger adults, hearing loss raises fears about fitting in, looking different, career choices, relationships or dating. Middle-aged adults worry about the impact on communication with spouses or children. Older adults connect hearing loss with aging, a decline, and loss of independence.

Your poor hearing is not the real problem; your beliefs about it are. The hearing loss is real and unchangeable, but the interpretation of it varies from person to person. Your beliefs shape your emotional reactions. Thoughts such as "this makes me weak" or "people will think less of me" influence how a person feels emotionally. Beliefs can produce shame, anxiety, discouragement, hopelessness, anger, and withdrawal. The same hearing loss can lead to different outcomes. One person may think that this is difficult, but I can manage it. Another person may think this ruins everything. The hearing loss may be similar, but beliefs lead to different emotional outcomes.

Beliefs affect behavior. If a person believes that asking for help is embarrassing, they may stop asking. Change becomes possible when beliefs are examined. So, the hearing loss may start the struggle, but beliefs often determine how heavy that struggle becomes.

Hearing loss changes the way you see yourself. Your poor hearing is not the real problem; your beliefs about it are. I always tell people you are what you perceive, you are who you think you are – nothing more, nothing less. Hearing loss can affect how you think about yourself, and it can begin to affect how capable you feel in general. Over time, hearing loss can wear down self-esteem. You may start to feel inadequate, dependent, or burdensome.

We cannot fix hearing loss, but we can reduce the stress it causes. You shape your own reality, and most stress is created in your own mind. Communication adjustments can be very helpful and make a big difference. Start by asking people to face you, and letting others know what helps and what confuses you.

To rewrite your story, you must first understand your belief system. We all live by the stories we tell ourselves – about who we are, what limits us, and what others think of us. A healthier story can create a healthier emotional life. Shifting from "I am helpless" to "This is difficult, but I am learning to manage it" can make a meaningful difference. To make that shift, notice the old beliefs shaping your story and challenge them. For example: "I struggle in some situations, but I can still connect with others." Because old stories may have been reinforced for years, new ones must be practiced, supported, and repeated. We do not simply react to events; we react to our interpretation of them. Reality is shaped by the story the mind keeps telling. If that story is harsh, catastrophic, or hopeless, life can begin to feel that way. The opposite is also true. Pay attention to the thoughts that shape your emotional reality, because that is where much of the stress is created – and where much of the healing can begin.

If you keep doing the same thing and get the same result, try a different approach. This is especially true since familiar strategies are not always the best tactics. People tend to repeat what is familiar, especially when they feel stressed or vulnerable. But just because the response is familiar does not mean it is helpful. People often repeat the same unhelpful patterns because trying something new feels risky and fearful. Psychologists know that fear is the biggest motivator of people. I want to prepare you for resistance because growth feels uncomfortable. You must face your fears if you want to grow. Growth begins when people stop assuming the *old way* is the *only way*. Real change begins when you become willing to experiment with a new approach.

People with hearing loss usually suffer from hypervigilance. Hypervigilance means being constantly on guard, always trying to catch what might go wrong, and always preparing for the possibility of missing something important. It may begin before the event; it continues during the interaction and afterward as you replay the situation in your mind. Being on guard makes it difficult to be fully present.

Let's look at the ABC theory. What happens matters, but the way we interpret what happens matters even more. In the ABC model, we have (A) which is an activating event. Something happens, (B) is the belief, the interpretation of what just happened, and (C) is the consequence. You experience an emotional and behavioral reaction. It is not A that causes C. A is filtered through B that determines C. That is the heart of the model. In hearing loss, the activating event (A) might be something like missing part of a conversation or not understanding the question. The event is real, but it is only the starting point. Belief (B) is where the mind interprets what's happened. The mind quickly assigns meaning to it. The belief might be that this is embarrassing, I look foolish, I can't handle this, or this is a piece of cake. I have difficulty hearing, but people will understand if I miss something and ask for something to be repeated. I want to connect with the group. The consequence (C) is based on what the belief was regarding the event. The interpretation leads to consequences such as anxiety, shame, frustration, discouragement, or I am capable and I am better when I connect. It may be difficult, but I am part of the conversation. The interpretation of the activating event (A) leads to either a positive or negative emotional consequence (C).

Recognizing cognitive distortions. These are patterns of thinking that are inaccurate, exaggerated, or unhelpful, yet they often feel completely true in the moment. Common distortions for hearing loss are **catastrophizing**. "I missed part of that conversation." "This is awful." "I will never be able to handle social situations again." **Mind reading:** they think I'm stupid; they're probably tired of

repeating things. **All or nothing theory:** If I can't follow the whole conversation, I might as well not participate and just give up. These distortions leave no room for partial success or improvement. Feelings are real, but they are not reliable evidence. Recognizing cognitive distortions helps you distance yourself from them. The moment you can say that is catastrophizing or that is mind reading, you begin to separate yourself from the thought instead of it being part of you. When you start observing it, you use cognitive restructuring in the process of changing the way we interpret a situation. Once the thought is identified, the next step is to question it. Is it true? Is it fully true? The thought begins to lose some of its power when it is examined.

Avoidance behavior may bring temporary relief, but it does not pay off in the long run. Because of the immediate relief, it becomes so tempting. Avoidance behavior may reduce distress in a moment, but it does not solve the underlying problem. When people keep stepping back from life, they may begin to lose confidence in their ability to cope. When someone begins avoiding gatherings, conversations, activities or relationships can suffer.

Growth usually requires discomfort, and trying new strategies may feel uncomfortable at first. But that discomfort is part of the process. The way out of avoidance is often gradual. It may mean practicing one new communication skill or staying in a situation just a little longer than usual. Small steps count.

Listening closely and asking questions can be very helpful. By focusing on one or two key words, you can often stay engaged in the conversation. Key words carry the main meaning of a sentence, such as names, places, times, actions, or the main topic being discussed.

Good questions help you recover what you missed. A more focused question works better. For example, who are you talking about? What happened next? Was that about your daughter or your grandson? Those kinds of questions help narrow the topic and make it easier to connect. Questions usually shift the communication from passive to active. Asking good questions puts you back in the conversation. It gives you a way to steer things instead of feeling lost or helpless. It feels less awkward to ask for a keyword or a main point than to ask for a repeat of the entire sentence. There is power in asking great questions and using keywords.

Tell stories that people remember. A good story captures attention and creates connections. Storytelling is a learnable skill. You do not have to be naturally gifted or highly entertaining to become a better storyteller. Good stories include a setting, a situation, a problem, or a challenge. You can even create a story to educate others about hearing loss.

Specific details bring a story to life where it happened, who was there, who said what, what were you feeling. Specific details help people see this scene in their mind. You can use current events, sports, politics, gardening, bird watching, your pet, or your first date. The first time you tell a story, it may seem awkward. Practice with family and friends. This will take the spotlight off your hearing loss.

One of the healthiest shifts that a person can make is to stop making hearing loss the center of every interaction. Hearing loss is hard enough on its own, but when a person becomes preoccupied with how they are coming across, the burden becomes heavier. Most people are less focused on your hearing than you think. That sense of spotlight is stronger with you than it is with the outside world. Most people focus on themselves, their own thoughts and their own concerns, not your poor hearing. When people begin to think of themselves primarily in terms of their hearing loss, they may start organizing their whole sense of self around the problem. The more we focus on connection, the less intense the spotlight becomes.

Confidence and self-esteem can be built or rebuilt through practice. Hearing loss can damage confidence, but it does not destroy the ability to rebuild it. Practice is what makes changes in self-perception and speaking up more. Using new strategies and reducing avoidance all create experiences that gradually reshape self-image. Remember, confidence usually begins after the action, not before it. Confidence and self-esteem are not only affected by behavior, but they are also influenced by self-talk.

We must learn to adapt because we live in a hearing focused world. The world is not designed for hearing loss. Restaurants, meetings, family gatherings, phone systems, public announcements, and casual conversation all play a part in offering challenges. In the hearing world, people who adapt well tend to be more emotionally resilient. Adapt by winging it. When something comes up, say, “What do I have to do to achieve that goal?” That’s the only question necessary. Obstacles only occur when we take our eye off the prize. Ask what you must do to achieve your goal and then do it. Do not get scared, distracted, or take your eye off the prize. The more you adapt, the more likely you are to stay involved in conversations, relationships, work, and social life.

Pay attention to what you can control and what you can modify. You can control how you respond. You may not control the hearing challenge, but you can control your response to it. You can control whether you panic or pause, whether you withdraw or stay engaged. Shift your energy toward what can be influenced. Healthy coping is a combination of acceptance and modification.

Do not underestimate yourself. One of the most damaging things you can do is to begin to underestimate yourself because of your hearing loss. When you underestimate, you speak less, you try less, you expect less, and you pull back from life. When people feel discouraged, they tend to focus more on what is harder and lose sight of what remains strong. When people stop underestimating themselves, they are more likely to stay engaged, try new approaches, ask for what they need, and discover that they can do more than they think.

Be kind to yourself. You may be stronger and more capable than you realize. The fact that you keep going, keep trying to communicate, keep adjusting, and keep carrying on in a hearing focused world says something about you. It is about your endurance. Believing in your strength changes how you live. When people begin to see themselves as stronger and more capable, they often behave differently. They are more willing to stay engaged, and more willing to try new approaches. Sometimes we need to be reminded that the person we have been criticizing is someone who has been working very hard and carrying a heavy load.

Do not put off until tomorrow what you can do today. One of the biggest obstacles to growth is waiting because waiting becomes never. As you avoid the issue, self-doubt and emotional strain often allow the problem to settle in more deeply. It is one thing to say that I need to handle this differently. It is another thing to actually do something different. Emotional growth happens when insight turns into action. Action does not have to be dramatic. It may mean asking one question you normally would not ask or attending one event you might have skipped. This action builds confidence, not because everything is solved, but because you are no longer standing still. If people wait until they feel fully ready, fully comfortable, or fully confident, they will wait forever.

I like to ask people to name one thing they will do differently after today. One clear realistic step is often far more powerful than a long list that never gets used. The action should be personal. It may involve being kinder to yourself. It may be attending an event that you have been avoiding. Challenging one harsh belief is where you start. The key is that it feels personal. When people name something clearly, even silently, to themselves, it becomes more real. So, think, what is the one thing I will do differently after today?

Keep in mind, hearing loss is not just about missing words, hearing aids, cochlear implants or audiograms. It's about stress, frustration, self-doubt, relationships, confidence, and the way you live with yourself every day. It can shape the story you tell yourself about who you are. While you may not be able to change the hearing loss, you can change the way you live and deal with it. You can

change the beliefs that make it worse and keep you stuck. You can learn to be more flexible and more compassionate with yourself. Hearing loss is not easy, and it creates real limitations. That can be frustrating and painful, but it does not get to define your worth, your identity, your strengths, or your future. I encourage you to have one simple question in mind: **What is the one thing I will do differently after today?** Not five things. Not ten things, just one. One thing that might help you live with a little more confidence and a little more kindness toward yourself. Real change begins with one insight, one decision, one new way of thinking, and one small act of courage.

Remember: **Of all your relationships, the most important is the one you have with yourself.** Please take care of that relationship because it affects everything. I look forward to all of you sending me an email about one thing that you are doing differently.

Comments, questions or words of wisdom?

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