

SOUND information
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Relationships, Self-Image, and Social Life Greatly Improve with Hearing Loss Treatment

Of the American population affected by some type of hearing loss, more than 19 million are ages 45 and up — but three out of five older Americans (65+) and six out of seven middle-age Americans with hearing loss do not use hearing aids, creating a gap in communication and social activities that affects many individuals at a deeper level than their loved ones may understand. Many with hearing loss choose not to engage in social activities because the stigma associated with it is embarrassing; the belief that they are “weak,” “old,” or are in need of help because they have hearing loss can be difficult to reconcile, despite the fact that treatment is likely to improve their social lives.



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Individuals who cannot understand or hear what others are saying sometimes choose to avoid social situations entirely, rather than ask others to repeat themselves — especially in situations where background noise is significant. Avoiding social outings with friends and family begins the process of social isolation that contributes to loneliness and depression, two factors that have become more common in those with hearing loss.

Over the past 15 years in particular, research on the subject has become prominent. Dr. Frank Lin, an assistant professor and researcher for Johns Hopkins University, examined data spanning from 1999 to 2006 to determine a cross-sectional association between social isolation and hearing loss. Social isolation scores were based on the presence or absence of emotional support, financial support, close friends, spouse, or partner; hearing level scores were defined as pure-tone average in the better-hearing ear. Results showed that social isolation and hearing loss were found to be especially significant in women ages 60 to 69, when cognitive impairment occurred faster by an estimated three years.

Another survey of 2,300 adults 50 and older, performed by the National Council on Aging (NCOA), found that **those with untreated hearing loss were more likely to report depression, anxiety, and paranoia, and were less likely to participate in organized social activities compared to those who wear hearing aids.** Seniors who did not wear hearing aids reported feelings of sadness or depression that lasted two or more weeks in the previous years, and the perception that other people got angry with them for no reason — an indicator of paranoia — was increased. Among those with severe hearing loss, the difference was even greater.

This survey, much like Dr. Lin's research, also examined social behavior and found that people who don't use hearing aids were much less likely to participate in social activities. Some effects of hearing loss on the quality of social life — on the part of all individuals in conversation — are more obvious than others. Understanding trivial elements of conversation becomes more difficult. Individuals focus more energy on what a person is saying, and on watching the speaker's face and body language for cues; so much energy is spent focusing on what is being said that less energy can be spent thinking of a reply. Those with hearing loss usually sit closer to the speaker in order to hear key elements. Communicating with friends and loved ones becomes an exhausting, frustrating exercise, and avoiding them altogether seems a better option for some.

Another significant component of the NCOA study was that 2,090 close family members or friends of the hearing impaired were asked a parallel set of questions, both before treatment and after treatment. Benefits of treatment with hearing aids were significant, offering improvements in many areas of life, ranging from relationships and social life to sense of independence:

- Relations at home improved by 56 percent according to the hearing aid user, 66 percent according to family and friends.
- Self-image improved by 50 percent according to the user, 60 percent according to family and friends.
- Life overall improved by 48 percent according to the user, 62 percent according to family and friends.
- Relations with children and grandchildren improved by 40 percent according to the user, 52 percent according to family and friends.
- Mental health improved by 36 percent according to the user, 39 percent according to family and friends.
- Self-confidence improved by 39 percent according to the user, 46 percent according to family and friends.
- Sense of safety improved by 34 percent according to the user, 37 percent according to family and friends.
- Social life improved by 34 percent according to the user, 41 percent according to family and friends.
- Relations at work improved by 26 percent according to the user, 43 percent according to family and friends.

Despite these results, refusal to wear hearing aids remains the primary obstacle to a better life through better hearing. Among the reasons stated for refusal were cost, the feeling that respondents' hearing was not bad enough to need a hearing device, and that they could "get along" fine without them. One in five stated, "It would make me feel old" or "I'm too embarrassed to wear one."

Statistics show that almost two-thirds of men with hearing loss began to lose their hearing before age 44, meaning many of the more than 19 million middle-age or older adults with hearing loss are likely to face far worse hearing in later years than they had when they were younger. Data shows quality of life is much worse before hearing aids and much better after. Once hearing aids are fit, and the brain rewires itself to adjust to the sounds that have been missing, the only reason to turn back is social stigma. Through continuing education and specialized treatment, better hearing can help to eliminate social isolation — and our community can be happier and healthier than ever before. ■

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