

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES FOR HARD-OF-HEARING PEOPLE

By Lynn Meyer, MC, LPC, NCC

Hard-of hearing people (HOH) tend to “live on the fence” between the hearing and Deaf worlds, not quite fitting into either community. This life-long experience can result in mental and behavioral health issues.

Because hearing loss is a hidden disability, other people are often unaware of it, especially if the individual is ashamed to mention the hearing loss. Even if people are aware that a person has hearing loss, they may not be sensitive to the HOH person’s need for assistance at times.

Being HOH can result in social isolation. That is because a person avoids social situations due to not being able to hear what is going on in large groups and because many environments are noisy, such as restaurants. It is a struggle to participate in social and recreational activities due to the amount of concentration it requires. The frustration of missing a lot of what is happening oftentimes outweighs any pleasure the HOH person might derive from the social activity itself. However, there are several things a HOH person can do to combat social isolation. Using hearing aids or other assistive listening devices will help. Visiting restaurants at a less busy time (11am or 4pm), and sitting in a quiet area in the restaurant away from doors and the kitchen or bar will ensure better hearing.

Learning in school or continuing education settings is also a challenge because the person misses some of what is being said by the teacher and other students. People sometimes perceive HOH people as being stupid because they may ask a question that someone else has already asked, but the truth is the person didn’t hear the speaker ask it. In fact, for conversations in general, people may think people with hearing loss are slow learners because they respond with a delay. The pause is really them trying to figure out what they were just asked based on what little they heard, the speaker’s facial expression and the context of the situation. Being patient with the person who has hearing loss will help.

The world of work presents challenges too. Given that most employers do not want the hassle of providing accommodations, job applicants are afraid to disclose their hearing loss in a job interview for fear of discrimination. Additionally, HOH employees often feel left out of the social loop because they can’t always hear the quiet comments that are made about co-workers or upcoming changes in the workplace. Participating in staff meetings is difficult because colleagues often talk over one another, it’s difficult to lip read, papers are rustling, etc. There are many things a HOH employee and their employer can do to alleviate these difficulties. When the HOH employee is open and honest about their hearing loss, it gives their colleagues an opportunity to communicate

better with them. Assistive devices, notetaking, prep materials in advance, and Relay Conference Captioning are some of the low or no-cost accommodations employers can make for their valuable HOH employee.

Relationship issues abound for the HOH. There is a fear of disclosing your hearing loss to the person one is dating because there is the worry that he/she may judge you in some negative manner. Wearing hearing aids and not being able to hear “sweet nothings” whispered in one’s ear can negatively impact intimacy. Then, of course, there is a greater potential for conflicts due to communication misunderstandings. Communication patterns are developed over a lifetime and can be difficult to change, however it is possible to learn new ways of communicating and relating so that each communication partner in a relationship benefits.

HOH parents have additional challenges. It is difficult to hear children, since they do not always speak clearly and have soft voices to begin with. Next, there are the safety issues of not being able to hear one’s children call you when they are in distress. Let’s not forget that as children age they may start to use their parent’s hearing loss in a manipulative manner, such as “I told you that mom. You just didn’t hear me.” Additionally, HOH people have difficulty interacting in person or over the phone with school officials, daycare providers and other parents simply because schools can be noisy and rushed environments.

All of the above can cause HOH people to bluff their way through work, school and family events, acting as if they know what is being said. That can contribute to low self-esteem. In fact, studies show an increase in the prevalence of social emotional problems among the HOH. There is depression due to the restricted communication that, in turn, limits opportunities for socializing. Then there are the feelings of low self-worth, which stem from being stigmatized or isolated. Research has shown that the HOH have a lower quality of social relationships than hearing people or the signing Deaf. This is because those who were pre-lingually deaf have quality relationships in the signing community and hearing people are already a member of the majority culture. Having a strong cultural identity can be a safeguard against mental health problems. Unfortunately, the HOH are lacking such a cultural identity. Thus, the HOH person must learn how to navigate the hearing loss journey through online resources, local support groups, and professional counselors skilled in hearing loss issues.

HOH adolescents are more vulnerable to the psychological effects of social isolation and stigma. They tend to have fewer friends due to difficulty in interacting. In addition, they are at risk of having lower self-esteem stemming from either outright bullying or internalized negative stereotypes about Deaf/HOH people. Many resist using assistive technology because of the stigma associated with it. So then they fall behind academically, as they are missing the learning that occurs in the classroom as well as

the social learning that happens in the lunchroom or locker room. HOH adolescents often avoid participating in sports activities because they can't hear the plays on the field or the score being called on the court. If adolescents internalize all these negative emotions, they may end up engaging in anti-social behavior or turn to using alcohol or drugs to emotionally numb themselves. Research reveals Deaf and HOH people have a higher rate of substance abuse disorders than the general population. Arizona Hands and Voices is a support group for families with children who are Deaf or HOH. HOH adolescents who interact with others like themselves will feel less isolated. There is also a Lions summer camp for Deaf and HOH young people.

A protective measure against mental health issues is feeling a part of a community of like-minded individuals. Therefore, it is important for HOH people to participate in organizations such as the Hearing Loss Association of America support groups (Prescott, Tucson, Sun Lakes, and West Valley) along with other support groups like the one in Fountain Hills and the ALOHA group in Tucson, and activities such as the annual Arizona Walk4Hearing (in Mesa on 11-11-17). Check out the ACDHH's website for more information on these resources or call 602-542-3323. Additionally, if more emotional support is needed, the HOH person can check the ACDHH's Resource Directory for counselors who understand the issues specific to being a HOH person.

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