

“Outing Ourselves”

At an HLAA National Convention several years ago, I saw a young lady with bright orange hearing aids. I thought they would glow in the dark. They definitely attracted attention. When she was asked, she simply replied that “I’m Outing Myself.” In other words, she was telling the world she had a hearing problem. Hearing loss was a challenge that she not only accepted but one that she shared with others. She was inviting others to assist her with communication and understanding. Most of all, she saw hearing loss as something not to be ashamed of but to be addressed. It was not a disability but rather a challenge.

Unlike this young lady, most of us strive to hide our hearing loss to our own detriment. If others don’t know we have a loss, how can they help us to understand? Why wouldn’t they become frustrated with our “what did you say?” HUH? What? Our bluffing must make others think we have borderline dementia of some kind. Yet, we continue to purchase the smallest aids possible not because they will help us hear better but rather so others won’t know we just can’t hear.

It needs to be understood that there are situations where this is appropriate. There are predators who could use our loss as their advantage. In the past, special hearing loss auto license plates were considered to assist police and first responders in communicating with us. It was pointed out that predators could then sit back and wait for us to return to our cars and sneak up behind us. Although it is against the ADA, there are employers who would look for excuses to dismiss an HOH/deaf person.

With that caveat, it is important that we actually “OUT OURSELVES”. We need to inform others of our communication issues. Asking for assistive listening devices (ALDs) is imperative for our social well-being. Not hearing leads to misunderstanding, introversion, isolation and in some cases dementia.

In fact, we simply don’t know that what we hear is what was actually said. (Richard G. Beyond Hearing Aids/Yahoo Groups) That means we have to practice good communication skills and verify what we think the person said, and “Believe this is constant choice. You pay the price if you guess wrong.” (Richard G)

“At the same time, there really hasn't been a lot of structured opportunities for people with hearing loss to learn what they themselves can do to become as knowledgeable as possible about optimizing their own ability to comprehend speech and to be assertive about it. Without such opportunities, many people with hearing loss are likely to feel quite **disempowered and discouraged.**” (Beyond Hearing Aids, Yahoo Groups). *Disenfranchised* is another word that says I just don't belong because I don't understand.

I believe that this is the help that **H**earing **L**oss **A**ssociation of **A**merica (HLAA) gives. HLAA helps us to realize that we are not alone. It gives us a chance to learn and practice good HOH/deaf communication skills. Through HLAA we are exposed to “structured opportunities” that enhance our social abilities. HLAA provides “education, advocacy and support” that might not be found in other places.

More than anything, we need to become assertive. We must be our own best advocate. “Perhaps this conversation can challenge us to look into whether there's more that we can do to change our circumstances and our own behavior and resources. Have we been as clear as we could be in explaining to other people what our limits are and what we need to understand speech better? Have we engaged in an interactive discussion about what can be done to make communication more effective, perhaps on an ongoing basis? Could we do something different or creative to put ourselves in environments that are much more conducive for better communication? Could we make use of assistive listening technology to help us communicate better? Are we willing to venture outside the bounds of extremely conventional and traditional expectations of behavior to do what we need to do in order to understand other people better? If not, what would help us take some small steps to do that?” (Beyond Hearing Aids/Yahoo Groups).

We are after all a self-help group. Help Yourself! Help Others!

(This article was stimulated by a discussion on Yahoo Groups [Beyond-Hearing] Digest Number 3024