Can they really hear you? Find out here…

By Laura Strasser, Columbia Hearing Centers

"Don't you have your hearing aids in?" A common question, but when the answer is, “Yes,” it can be frustrating.

Most often, the hearing aids are doing their job – they are bringing sound into a damaged ear. However, because the ear is damaged, the sounds sent to the brain are not always clear.

Conversation with the hearing impaired, even those with hearing aids, can be a pleasant experience if you remember one basic thing. People with hearing aids still have trouble in some situations. How can you best converse with them? Here are some tips…

- Always face the person you wish to speak with and stand as close as possible. This also gives them the opportunity to receive visual cues from your expression, hand gestures, and lip reading.
- Try to put background noise behind the person you are speaking to.
- If possible, turn down or off the competing noise (example TV) or move to a quieter location.
- Don't sit at a table in the center of a restaurant or one near the kitchen or door.
- Some people will assume they should be able to understand what you are saying and will pretend they do when they don't. If you think this is happening, try again.
- It is reassuring to be told that a normal hearing person is also having difficulty hearing.

Because they need to funnel their concentration to hear, be sure that you have their attention before beginning to speak. Do not try to carry on a conversation from a different room of the house even if it is quiet. Your voice becomes distorted from bouncing off of the walls, being raised, or shouting. Because folks with hearing aids are "listening" with their eyes as well, use these tips for better communication.

- Make sure the room is well lit.
- Do not talk with anything in your mouth- gum, cigarette, food, etc.
- Do not put your hands or the newspaper in front of your face.
- Face the person directly. Do not turn your head while speaking.

During conversation the brain is working on trying to fill in the distorted sounds and misunderstood words from the context of the conversation. So make sure you…

- speak slowly and clearly
- speak at a normal conversational volume- do not shout that distorts speech more
- understand that this is a lot of work and can be tiring
- watch for facial cues that you are not being understood

If you are not being understood, please rephrase rather than repeat. Be patient and keep a sense of humor. These communication tips will be helpful for everyone in difficult hearing situations.

Laura Strasser is a hearing instrument specialist with Columbia Hearing Centers. She holds weekly office hours at the Davenport and Wilbur clinics and offers free hearing screens. To make an appointment, call toll free 1-866-369-1020.