

Masking sound: Pandemic makes life even more difficult for hearing impaired

By Becky Vargo/Grand Haven Tribune Jan 15, 2021

A co-worker walked into a Grand Haven store last week and encountered an employee wearing a face mask with the words “hearing impaired” printed on it.

It changed the way he interacted with the woman and raised a concern about a situation he has yet to encounter since the COVID-19 face mask requirements went into effect 10 months ago. How do you communicate with a hearing impaired person when your face is half-covered by a mask?

Many hearing impaired, whether they realize it or not, are reading your lips and watching your facial expressions to help them understand what you are saying, said Kristin Johnston, owner of Comprehensive Ear and Hearing of Grand Haven. The loss of the visual aspect of communication may mean the hearing impaired person doesn't understand much of what you are saying, she explained. For many people, depending on the degree of hearing loss, this can lead to depression and potentially to an escalation of dementia.

While many people are not willing to admit they have a hearing problem, Johnston said the current situation has driven many to ask for help.

Not only are the masks getting in the way, by covering up the mouth and muffling voices, there is also the social distancing mandate that keeps us from getting close enough for the person to hear.

“You add background noise and there's a big difference between hearing and understanding,” Johnston said.

That happens with even moderate hearing loss.

About 10 percent of the general population has some level of hearing loss, Johnston said. One in three people over age 60 experience some hearing loss. By age 70, 50 percent of the population has hearing loss.

Aging is the No. 1 cause for hearing loss, Johnston said. Other reasons for hearing loss are genetic, having wax in the ear or, more rarely, having damage to the auditory nerve or having a tumor.

During the pandemic, Johnston said hearing specialists quickly realized they were essential frontline workers.

“We were not busy doing fittings,” she said. “It was more the simple things like doing a repair or replacing a battery.”

Johnston said her office immediately started curbside service, where someone could drop off a hearing aid, staff would fix it and the customer would pick it up – curbside again. They also switched to a lot of tele-health service, which includes instructional videos on how to clean a hearing device, how to work it and how to troubleshoot it.

People with hearing loss have a tendency to pull away, Johnston said. In some cases, where they have trouble communicating, they lose socialization because people are put off by the inability to communicate.

What can you do?

What people can do now, when speaking with someone who is hearing impaired, is first get his or her attention by saying something like, “Hey Mom.”

Johnston said to talk slowly and articulate your words.

Turn off other sound sources so it is easier for the person to concentrate.

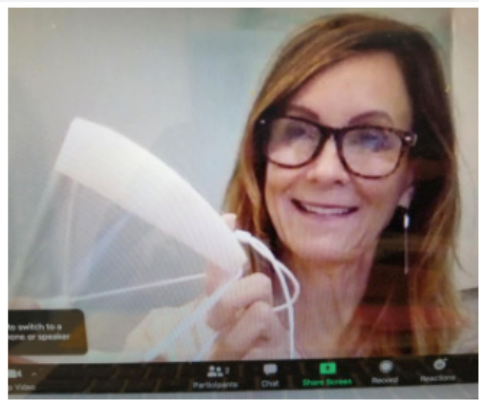
Making sure the person has the proper telephone designed for hearing impaired is also important.

Johnston said when people lose hearing, it's usually at one end of the spectrum or other. Turning up the volume on most phones or over-the-counter hearing amplifiers will only raise the volume across the spectrum, which means it also amplifies background noise. It needs to be more selective.

Johnston also uses a clear mask when people come in for appointments so they can see her lips move and see expressions. Clear masks and phones for the hearing impaired can be found on the shopping section of her website at comprehensiveearandhearing.com.



Kristin Johnston, owner of Comprehensive Ear and Hearing in Grand Haven, uses a clear mask to speak to a hearing-impaired client.



Kristin Johnston shows an example of another clear mask available in the online store on her website.

Initial hearing tests are administered for free by most professionals, because insurance won't cover the cost unless a person has a medical issue, Johnston said. She recommends people get their first test at around age 45-50 to establish a baseline for their hearing.