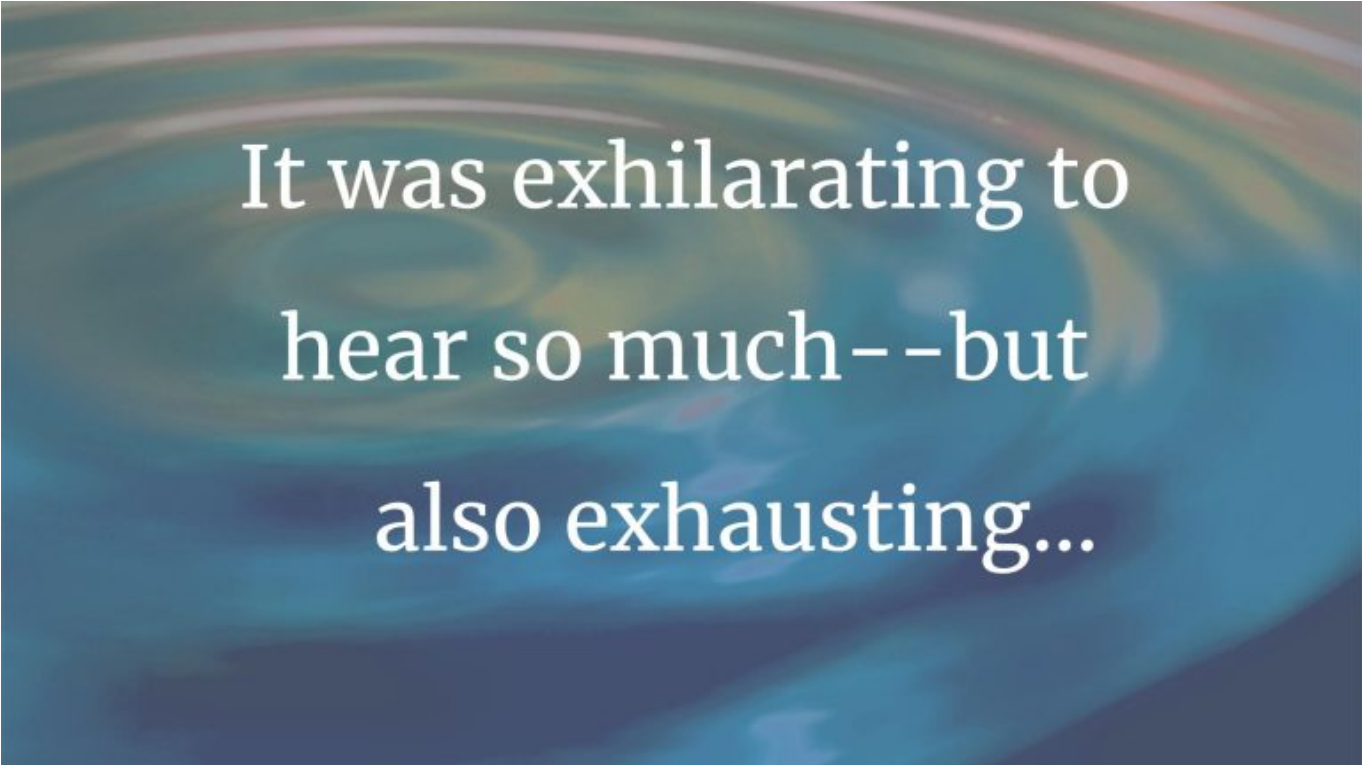


# Hearing Impaired

Category: Stories

written by Abbey Pachter | April 26, 2024



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hear so much--but  
also exhausting...

"Pick up the phone, Mom," I said, dashing into the kitchen after answering our landline in the living room.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Dunno. I can't understand what they're saying," I said.

When she picked up the receiver, the caller—her father—got right to the point: "She can't hear."

As young as I was—only six—that turned out to be partly true. And this episode marked the beginning of a lifelong journey towards self-awareness—a journey filled with discoveries, even now.

Mom took me to an ear, nose and throat doctor at the Kuhn Clinic in nearby Hammond, Indiana. I looked around the waiting room, astonished by the contents of its eight large display cases: items removed from children's ears, nostrils and throats—everything from beans and coins to impossibly large baby rattles and open diaper pins.

Mom held my hand as we walked to the exam room. The doctor asked a few questions, then performed an otoscopic inspection—there were no beans in *my* ears—and pressed tuning forks to the bones behind them.

Next, the audiologist tested me, saying, "Raise your hand each time you hear a sound."

The doctor shared the results with my mother.

“Your daughter has considerably less hearing in her right ear. It’s due to nerve damage—probably from when she had measles and a high fever earlier this year—so a hearing aid won’t help. Her left ear is completely normal. She shouldn’t need any special attention to do fine in school. You should have her retested yearly, but her hearing most likely won’t deteriorate.”

If my parents felt concerned or relieved, I never heard about it. No one at home or at school ever mentioned hearing impairment to me, so I didn’t react to it either.

Hearing evaluations became one of my annual checkups. As predicted, my hearing remained stable. I got tested so often that the various notes fired in my brain randomly (they still do). When one audiologist complained that I was raising my hand when she wasn’t playing the tones, Mom supported me, saying, “If she says she’s hearing them, she’s hearing them.” She marched me out, and we changed doctors.

Life went on, and I grew up, attended college and became a nurse. In my late thirties, I had trouble understanding a soft-spoken friend’s voice, so I got my hearing tested again.

This time, even though the ENT said a hearing aid wouldn’t help, I decided to try one. Maybe a “no obligation” ad tipped the balance; I don’t recall. I *do* know that when I tried the device, my hearing went from mono to stereo.

It was exhilarating to hear so much that I’d never heard before—but also exhausting. Away from home, I’d turn down the hearing aid to tune out excess street noise. At home, I’d turn it up to better hear my friends and my kids. I’d wear it for an hour or two, then take it out to rest, for days or even weeks.

When I did wear it, I marveled that I could look people in the eye as they spoke, instead of watching their lips for word clues. I had no idea that I’d been depending on lipreading. Unconsciously, I’d also adapted by walking between my friends to hear them better, and hanging out with one or two friends rather than in groups, where I couldn’t hear as well.

I’d never thought to compare my hearing with other people’s. Listening to music was not problematic, but song lyrics and theatrical productions were difficult. I hadn’t realized that I experienced these differently until I attended a performance of *Rent* with friends; afterwards, they enthused over the lyrics, which I’d found unintelligible. I also learned that the random tones and ringing that I’d thought everyone was hearing were actually tinnitus.

The fact that I was benefitting from hearing assistance started to sink in.

When I had an opportunity to hear Maya Angelou read her poetry, I gave the box office my driver’s license to borrow headphones. Comprehending every word was a joy—and a revelation: I finally realized how much I’d been missing.

Still, I continued to wear my new hearing aid only sporadically, thinking, *I've been a nurse for fifteen years without a hearing aid, and no one at work has mentioned any problems.*

My graduate-school midwifery program director changed that. She sneaked up behind me, whispered some words—which I didn't hear—then gave me an ultimatum:

"Wear it all the time. Otherwise, I'll kick you out. You need to hear as best you can."

After a few months, I *liked* wearing my hearing aid all the time; it helped me feel more engaged in conversations. Wearing it became a habit: I put it on every morning along with my earrings.

Then, when I was fifty, yet another test revealed a new aspect of my hearing deficit. The audiologist explained that my word discrimination is about half the normal rate. For example, I might think "cat" is "cap," or "tap" is "tab." My old hearing aid amplified what I heard, but couldn't improve my word discernment.

This explained the lag in my engagement during conversations: People's words came faster than I could process them, and my hearing aid didn't compensate for this.

After spending time with a group of people, I'd always needed quiet time to recover. I'd assumed that this was because I was an introvert; now I began to think that perhaps it was because I was fatigued by trying to decipher people's words.

The new, more advanced hearing aid my audiologist gave me was so much larger and more noticeable that I cried—until I realized how much better I heard with it.

My self-concept changed. Rather than thinking of myself as an introvert, I identified myself as someone with a hearing impairment. This led me to act on my own behalf in situations where formerly I might have missed out.

For instance, after missing a flight due to not hearing the gate-change announcement, I told the next agent, "I'm hearing-impaired. If there's an announcement, you must come look me in the eye and tell me." It was the first time I'd said it: "I'm hearing-impaired."

It got easier. A typical scenario took place at a board meeting I attended, where the forty members sat at eight tables arranged in a U.

"Can everyone hear me without the mic?" asked the president. "My voice is loud."

I raised my hand, picked up a nearby mic and said, "For people like me who are hearing-impaired, a mic really helps."

He used the mic, so did everyone else, and I understood the proceedings very

well. Several people thanked me—some for raising their awareness, and others for speaking up when they'd felt reluctant to.

Two years ago, I learned that my hearing loss could be genetic. One of my children also has a mild hearing deficit, although it's a conductive hearing loss, different from mine. (As a child, she was vaccinated against measles, so at least that wasn't the cause.)

In the past year, I've noticed having more difficulty hearing in crowds. I had my hearing tested: My right ear's ability to distinguish words has decreased to 8 percent. Even though I already knew there'd been a deterioration, the news made me briefly weepy, as with each prior loss.

But my audiologist has a plan: She'll fit me with "a sexy, smaller, new hearing aid" that decreases ambient noise, which should help.

I'm optimistic and eager to try it: I want to have the best hearing I possibly can.