

Lip-reading

On being deaf **A majority of people over the age of 60 have some**

‘Deafness is comic, as blindness tragic’. So says David Lodge in *Deaf Sentence*, his novel which tackles the problem of deafness with humour and compassion. Lodge is deaf himself so is well-qualified to describe the comic misunderstandings which arise from not hearing properly, as well as the sense of isolation and loss of self-esteem it can bring.

The problem with deafness is that it is a disability which is invisible until one tries to communicate. If deaf people had the equivalent of a white stick, some badge to warn that they might need help, life would be easier for them. There is always a point at which one has to say: ‘I’m sorry I’m deaf’, at which the person with normal hearing either shouts or starts to mouth words in an elaborate way, neither of which helps that much.

But why should one say ‘I’m sorry?’ Nobody asks to be deaf. On the other hand, those of us who began to lose their hearing in later life can remember the difficulties of trying to talk to a deaf person, the feelings of helplessness and frustration, so have a certain sympathy for someone trying to communicate with us—hence the tendency to feel apologetic about one’s affliction.

For some, loss of hearing begins in one ear, and at first it seems that people are mumbling. Then you decide that your ear must be blocked, at which point you may try to do something about it yourself or, if you are sensible, you visit your GP. This will lead to a referral to an audiologist, which might result in your being fitted with one or two hearing aids. Problem solved? No, not really, because you are suddenly ejected into an alien world of noise, the clatter of heels in the corridor outside the consulting room, the muttering of people in the waiting room and you say, ‘No this can’t be right, the hearing world can’t be as loud as this’. But it is, and it gets worse when you get outside and hear the full volume of the traffic, the sirens, passers-by shouting into their mobile phones. Because hearing aids are indiscriminate—they amplify background sounds to such an extent that it is often a great relief to remove them and return to the calm muffled environment you are used to. There is also some distortion, so for many people hearing aids are of limited use. Hearing is particularly difficult in surroundings with hard surfaces—most

restaurants these days—or anywhere where there are crowds of people. Noise levels in these environments can be unbearable, even with hearing aids which have a programme to screen out background noise.

Small group situations are also difficult and there must be many U3A members who recognise the problem of trying to keep up with what is being said, and of being afraid to contribute in case the point you want to raise has already been discussed.

There are other situations where it is extremely important that you hear what is being said correctly, such as vital instructions about some task, or when a doctor is giving you information about test results. In a rushed interview, when one is under stress, mild panic can result when you realise you haven’t quite understood what has been said.

Having struggled for some time myself, and realising how much I depend on watching people’s lips and expressions, I recently decided to join one of the two lip-reading groups run by the South East London U3A. One, run by Andy Lockhart and convened by Gwen Parrish, has been going for a while and I believe was fully subscribed at the time I was looking for help. The second group, run by Carol Fender, started up recently; and that is the one to which I belong. I thought members might be interested to know a little about it.

Carol began by telling us about her own deafness. She began to go deaf at the age of 40 and eventually lost all her hearing. She now has a cochlear implant in one ear which enables her to hear reasonably well. She is an experienced teacher of lip-reading and has a most sympathetic approach.

Lip-reading is taught by the tutor ‘lip-speaking’ to the group and the group practising on each other, although there are other activities in Carol’s carefully prepared classes. One of the most common difficulties for people with age-related deafness is distinguishing between certain consonants. So far we have looked at the similarities on the lips of *p*, *b* and *m*, and, at the time of writing, are working on *f* and *v*. If readers are interested, try saying these sounds in front of a mirror and you will see how alike they are on the lips.

In addition to the lip-reading exercises, we have been given useful information about organisations

and aids which can help with deafness. Some of the information comes from Action on Hearing Loss (formerly the Royal Institution for the Deaf) the main organisation supporting deaf people. They produce advice leaflets, including brief notes for people speaking to someone with hearing loss.

Some might feel deafness is a problem which only affects older people, but this is not the case; it can happen at any age. Action on Hearing Loss estimates that there are ten million, or one in six of the population, with some degree of hearing loss in the UK and many of them are young adults. AHL are campaigning for a national screening programme for deafness and for wider recognition of the problems of hearing loss. This seems an excellent idea. Meanwhile, lip-reading groups such as Andy's and Carol's are a valuable way of trying to improve deaf people's ability to understand and take part in all kinds of activity. We deaf people like to hear what people thought of the latest film, we want to share in a joke, and we stand a much better chance of doing this if people with normal hearing realise how much we miss. Awareness of a deaf person is just as important as awareness of a blind person. Please let us feel included!

Ann Barlow contributed this excellent advice taken from an Action on Hearing Loss publication which I feel compliments Janet's interesting article. As a deaf person myself I can confirm it is excellent advice. Editor.

Five top tips on communicating with people with hearing loss

1. Don't shout—it rarely helps, it's uncomfortable for hearing aid wearers, and can seem confrontational
2. Speak clearly—speak at normal pace and use natural facial expressions and gestures
3. Always face the person you're talking to - not only will they hear you more clearly, but they'll also be able to lip-read if they need to
4. Use plain, concise language—waffling can be difficult to follow
5. Find a quiet place with good lighting—a quiet environment will make you easier to hear. Good lighting will make you easier to lip-read.

Reminiscence group at Sydenham Pauline Ryall reports

Five disparate people sat down together to recall their past lives and national events which had an effect on them. Subjects ranged from school days, the blitz, royalty, various family members and subjects such as 'first home', 'first job', and 'first kiss'.

Ann had started writing a book on her life and so had a head start writing, but we all soon found it easy to commit our thoughts to paper. Ernie wrote about his life as a printer and lecturer, this was fascinating as so much has changed in the printing world. John remembered his days as a propagator and gardener. This has also changed as plants are bought in for bedding instead of being grown on site. Pauline wrote about her family, going back to her grandparents who came to Kent by car from Blackpool in 1904.

Our leader and inspirer was Maggie who was full of ideas for us to write about.

The reason we met at this sheltered housing complex was to encourage the residents to join us. One lady came the first week and told of her life in Afghanistan with her husband. Sadly that was her only visit to the group.

After two terms we have reluctantly decided to close the class, as there are so few of us.

Friday Fantasia and Friday Forum

Goldsmiths College spring and summer terms do not always align with our U3A terms. It depends on when Easter falls.

This year Fantasia on 20 April and Forum on 27 April lie in the Goldsmiths College summer term, but they are still within our U3A current year which ends on 30 April. As such they should appear in the spring term programme but will, in fact, be printed in the summer term Programme. The speakers and titles for those two dates are not yet confirmed and both Anne Burrows as Fantasia convenor and Jennifer Russell-Pavier as Forum convenor will let their respective audiences know when that information becomes available and certainly before the end of the spring term.

They need to do this because we cannot guarantee that the summer programmes will have arrived on your doorstep before 20 April.