

## **Aging Happens: Say what? Hearing loss could lead to behavior change?**

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Most people would say that other than being a nuisance, hearing loss is not that big of a deal. Read this data from the American Academy of Audiology ([www.audiology.org](http://www.audiology.org)) and see if it changes your mind. From their website: "Untreated hearing loss has serious emotional and social consequences for older persons, according to a major new study by The National Council on the Aging (NCOA). The survey of 2,300 hearing impaired adults, age fifty and older, found that those with untreated hearing loss were more likely to report depression, anxiety, and paranoia and were less likely to participate in organized social activities, compared to those who wear hearing aids."

Additionally, if untreated, hearing loss includes a greater risk of falls, isolation, and earlier and more severe cognitive decline. Furthermore, about 20 percent of Americans, 48 million people (!), report some degree of hearing loss. At age 65, one out of three people has a hearing loss. It was time to hear from a local expert on this topic, Barbara Street, an Oregon licensed audiologist.

Street opened her first Rogue Valley audiology office in 1983, and her current Ashland office, Barika Audiology (<https://barikaaudiology.com>, 184 Clear Creek Dr. Suite # 1, 541-201-3201) opened in 2009. This interview is a "heavily-edited-for-space" version. Barb has a lot of enthusiasm and information on this topic. She has seen how treating hearing loss increases the quality of a person's life and health.

EW: Why is it important for people to have their hearing checked regularly?

BS: A hearing test provides an objective measure of your current hearing abilities. Since hearing loss usually develops slowly, you are not always able to notice whether you are missing sounds. If you have a hearing loss, an audiologist can recommend ways for you to hear better while in difficult listening environments.

EW: What are some of the unintended consequences of not hearing well?

BS: Strained relationships, depression and isolation are the most obvious. I've seen divorces, parents and children (or friends) refusing to speak with each other, and some who have nearly isolated themselves from any human contact. Safety can also be an issue. Being unable to hear a car's horn, or a fire alarm (yes, really!) or a telephone's ring. Research studies have shown a decline in cognitive functioning, and might be a contributing cause of Alzheimer's and dementia.

EW: What are the most common reasons for not getting a hearing aid?

BS: Denial, cost, and stigma — all tightly wrapped together. Nobody likes to admit they can't hear as well as they could as teenagers. Plus, the idea of wearing a device to help hear better carries a stigma of being old.

EW: How are most hearing aids paid for?

BS: They can be expensive. However, there are a range of options available now that weren't available 10 years ago. A good audiologist can save you a tremendous amount of time filtering through which options are best. Often what looks attractive can end up costing you more in the long run when you add service fees that you will pay over time. Most hearing aids are paid for out-of-pocket. Choices range from retail to big box discounters to internet providers. Alternatively, your health insurance may provide help. Assistance can be also be found through the Oregon Health Plan, and social services organizations — most notably, the Lions Club (<http://ashlandoregonlions.org>; 541-841-0771). (EW: People commonly assume that Medicare will pay for this, but they will not. For some reason, they don't consider hearing aids a covered medical device.)

EW: What is on the horizon for new hearing products?

BS: Not new, but digital sound processing continues to improve. Advances in directional microphone performance, dynamic adjustment to sound environments, and better noise reduction methods are light years better than 10 years ago. Connectivity to cell phones enables you to adjust parameters in real time, improving how your hearing aid performs in different environments. Apple and Samsung seem poised to introduce products that are well integrated with their phones and have unique approaches to sound processing, at a very attractive price.

Back to a reason for getting a hearing aid, if needed. I had a client who had stopped attending meals at the retirement center where she lived for many years. She was becoming depressed, stopped socializing, and seemed to have suffered a significant cognitive decline. Her doctor was ready to begin prescribing all sorts of medical tests and medications. Turns out that, you guessed it, she just needed her hearing tested and some good hearing aids. Once they were in place, she was much happier, was back to being social, and her apparent dementia was relieved, too. All due to a visit with the audiologist. A good idea for others to consider as well.