Listening in Restaurants
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Meal times are important across cultures. Food is often more than just a means of nourishment as it provides opportunities such as quality time with family, business meetings impacting future prospects, and meaningful connections with friends. Meal times become a necessary time to communicate.

One of the most common concerns reported by adults who are deaf or hard of hearing is communication in noisy environments, with restaurants frequently topping people’s lists of places where they struggle. Restaurants are often loud, with background noise such as dishes clattering, food preparation from the kitchen, the hustle of people being seated and leaving, and often mood music. To add to the challenge, there are conversations everywhere—patrons talk, wait staff take orders, and the host greets and takes reservations. Sheer noise!

When in an environment where there is environmental (background) noise and competing speech (talking) noise, many adults are faced with a frustrating situation. This can lead to myriad feelings such as fatigue after events or feelings of isolation. The term “Dinner Table Syndrome” was coined to describe the situation when a person who is deaf or hard of hearing is with a group of people with typical hearing and is unable to participate in the conversation due to the conversation being challenging to hear and process, which also reduces the person’s turn to share in the conversation (https://bit.ly/475pm55).

MANAGING RESTAURANT NOISE

The very nature of restaurants makes it difficult to create a truly quiet environment, but there are strategies and techniques that can be used to manage noise and promote better communication.

Restaurant Selection. When you have input on where to eat, you can prepare in advance and select restaurants that set you up for success. Some restaurants are quieter than others.

The free app Soundprint (https://www.soundprint.co/) allows users to measure volume in their current location, creating a scale from quiet (“safe for hearing, great for conversation”) to very loud (“long exposure can cause hearing loss; difficult for conversation”). The app is searchable to help someone find locations near where someone lives (or is visiting) that are quiet. SoundPrint analysts researched 18 major chain restaurants and released their findings on restaurant noise levels.

On the app website, there is a graph showing noise levels in chain restaurants (https://bit.ly/3TxmHtN).

When you’ve selected a restaurant, remember that off hours will generally be less crowded and less noisy. If you can go an hour earlier or later than the most popular mealtime, you may be able to enjoy a quieter atmosphere. Some restaurants will turn down or turn off music if asked as an accommodation. A polite ask might be: “One of our guests is hard of hearing. Could you quiet or turn off the music so he can hear and participate in the conversations during our meal? It will help us all better enjoy our experience.”

Modifying the Environment. Sometimes we can’t select the restaurant nor avoid popular times. In those scenarios, we can attempt to modify the environment as much as possible. Some tips to help include:

- Sit in the brightest area of the restaurant.
- Sit in a corner of the restaurant with your back to the corner.
- In a booth, try to sit next to the wall rather than facing out to the restaurant.
- If you have a “better ear,” sit with the better ear closest to everyone and further away from the noise.
- Sit away from the bar, kitchen, or any service stations in the restaurant.
- Avoid sitting next to large parties.
- Sit closest to those you wish to hear the most and consider sitting across from them to enhance lipreading or next to them if louder volume helps more.

Use Your Tools.

- Use assistive listening devices such as remote microphone systems that work with hearing aids and cochlear implants to increase the volume of the speaker in relation to the background noise.
- Remember to put the microphone next to or on the person/people you most want to hear.
- Use programs and settings on your hearing aids or cochlear implants to help you hear in noise.
- Use clarification strategies.
  - Instead of saying “what” or nodding when you do not truly understand, try repeating back what you did hear when asking for clarification.
  - If you say “what,” the person will repeat the whole message but if you ask for what part you did not hear, then they only repeat the missing information. For example, if you hear “We saw [indistinct words] at the store” you could ask “Who did you see at the store?”

From left: Lindsay Zombek provides aural rehabilitation services for children and adults at University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center. Donna L. Sorkin is the executive director of the American Cochlear Implant Alliance, helping to expand awareness and access to CI. www.acialliance.org

The Hearing Journal is proud to announce a partnership with the American Cochlear Implant Alliance to provide patient handouts.
- Clarify important information.
  - If you hear “Let’s meet at the golf course at 3:00 Tuesday,” you could repeat, “I’ll meet you at the golf course 3:00 on Tuesday,” which gives the speaker the opportunity to correct you if you heard it incorrectly.

- Build listening skills in noise.
  - Many aural rehabilitation listening apps provide the opportunity to add noise to practice targets.
  - Aural rehabilitation specialists can help create an exercise program to strengthen listening skills in noise.

- Take listening breaks.
  - Try to avoid activities where you must listen before you go to the restaurant. Give yourself a break before you go.
  - Excuse yourself to the restroom or for a quick step outside if you are feeling tired or overwhelmed by the effort of listening.

Restaurants are a challenging environment for all listeners, but particularly so if you have a hearing loss. By planning ahead, modifying the environment within your control and using tools, you can increase your likelihood of successful, meaningful conversation.