Tips for Overcoming the Challenges of Listening in Noise with a Cochlear Implant

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Cochlear Implants (CIs) are a revolutionary technology that assist people with hearing loss when hearing aids are no longer sufficient to bring clear communication. Despite advances over time, many recipients experience comprehension challenges in background noise such as multiple people talking, background music, and nearby appliances and machines—typical of the challenges anyone with hearing loss frequently notes. For those with continuing difficulty listening in noise, technology and techniques exist to promote a more positive listening experience.

OPTIMIZING PROGRAMMING

Work closely with your audiologist to review programming solutions. Honest discussion of challenges helps the audiologist refine the program to improve listening in noise. The audiologist may suggest programs designed to reduce background noise and increase the desired sound or voice relative to background noise. Try these programs in multiple environments to determine how each program works for you and when it is most helpful. Using settings related to volume, sensitivity, and those designed to reduce noise may increase success in listening in noise.

USING ASSISTIVE LISTENING DEVICES

Assistive listening devices are helpful in promoting better hearing in noise. These include devices that connect the CI to sound sources such as a computer or tablet, TV, or sound systems in theaters or other venues. Personal microphone systems such as FM or Bluetooth help a speaker’s voice become louder than background noise and are helpful in a variety of settings including work, social gatherings, and in the car.

MODIFYING THE ENVIRONMENT

Steps can be taken to improve the environment for listening.

- Be close to the most important speaker.
- Turn off extra noise sources (i.e., TV, music, dishwasher, washer/dryer).
- At events, have conversations in quieter rooms and in corners so that you have a wall behind you, instead of other people talking.
- In restaurants, make reservations for tables in corners that are away from the kitchen, bar, or service stations that create additional noise.
- Arrive early to select a seat away from noise sources and closest to the person you most want to hear.
- Select locations with good lighting and best sight of the speaker so your vision enhances what you hear.
- Use assistive listening devices, in concert with the above strategies, in social and business environments to help remain an active participant.

BUILDING LISTENING SKILLS

Aural rehabilitation (AR) is listening and communication therapy that can help build skills for listening in noise (and in other situations). An AR specialist can provide exercises and recommendations. CI centers can provide information about accessing aural rehabilitation services. Rehabilitative services are often covered by health insurance and may be provided in-person or sometimes via telehealth.

TIPS FOR BUILDING LISTENING SKILLS

Listening in noise may improve with practice. Ways to practice include:

Practice with a listening partner

- Turn on quiet music or TV and listen for words in a category heard (use categories such as colors, pets, pizza toppings).
- Repeat a sentence or paragraph from a book or magazine read by a listening partner with quiet music or TV on.
- Make it harder by slowly increasing the volume of the noise.

Resources

For free tips and exercises visit:

- CI Rehabilitation for Adults is a blog offered by American CI Alliance https://www.acialliance.org/page/AdultRehab
- Advanced Bionics: SoundSuccess https://hearing-success.com
- Cochlear: Communication Corner https://www.cochlear.com/us/communication-corner

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

The Hearing Journal is proud to announce a partnership with the American Cochlear Implant Alliance to provide patient handouts.

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Practice By Yourself
- Listen to conversations on a computer (TEDTalks, news, videos) using closed captioning.
- To make it harder, try:
  - Turning off closed captions
  - Listening to a variety of speakers (men, women, people with a dialect or accent different than yours)
  - Listening with a TV or music on at the same time, slowly increasing the volume.

MASKS
Masks make listening challenging for most people with hearing loss. Obtain see-through masks for family and others so that you benefit from visual clues, along with what you are hearing. Use assistive listening devices such as remote microphones to help make the speaker’s voice clearer. Practice listening in noise exercises with your listening partner wearing a mask to help build listening skills. Remind people that slow speech is better than loud speech.