

# Let's Talk Care

## How to Communicate With Someone Who Has Hearing Loss

Hearing loss can be devastating. It limits the person's ability to participate in conversations or social gatherings. It often causes people to become withdrawn, isolated and lonely, which in turn can lead to depression.

As people tend to lose their hearing gradually, they may not be aware of the problem, or they may be embarrassed or unwilling to admit that they are having trouble hearing. Many people try to cover up their hearing problem by pretending to understand what's been said to them or by reading the lips of the person speaking.

While hearing aids help some people with hearing impairments, they are not the answer for everyone. There are some types of hearing loss that do not respond to a hearing aid. Here are some techniques that can help families talk to relatives who are hearing challenged:

- ❑ Don't shout.
- ❑ Get the person's attention before you start to speak. For example, say the person's name clearly or touch the person gently on the shoulder or hands, being careful not to startle her or him. Touch can also help reinforce what you are saying and convey warmth, concern and caring.
- ❑ Face the person as you speak and do not put obstacles (such as your hands) in front of your face. Your facial expressions, lip movements and gestures will often help the person understand what you are saying.
- ❑ If the person relies on lip reading, make sure that if she/he wears glasses, the glasses are clean. Have your conversation in a well-lit area to ensure that your face and lips are visible. Some people find that it helps to wear lipstick so the person can see your mouth clearly.
- ❑ Speak clearly and distinctly in a low-pitched voice (high pitched voices are difficult to hear).
- ❑ Eliminate background noise that may pose a distraction. If possible, have the person sit with their back to a wall, which will eliminate 180 degrees of sound. If your relative has one "good" ear, be sure to sit on that side during your conversation.
- ❑ Watch the expression on the person's face – you'll be able to tell whether she/he has missed some of the conversation. If so, repeat one or two key

words or rephrase the sentence. Different words may be easier to understand.

- ❑ When you change a subject, make it very clear that you have done so or the hearing impaired person may become confused and tune out the conversation.
- ❑ Try to have a one-on-one conversation. Too many people speaking at once may make it very difficult to hear.
- ❑ Always talk *to* the person, not *about* her or him. Dignity and respect are key components to effective communication.
- ❑ If your relative uses a hearing aid, make sure it is in proper working condition and turned on. If you need assistance changing the batteries, nursing staff will show you how.
- ❑ Keep paper and a pen handy to write down any complex words that the person has difficulty understanding.

If your family member seems to be more withdrawn or irritable, you might want to have her or his hearing checked. In any case, it's a good idea for families to ensure that the resident's ears are examined regularly.

For more information on hearing loss and assistive devices, contact your local chapter of the Canadian Hearing Society or speak with your Director of Care.