

Learning to Hear Again

By SIDNEY BLACKSTONE

NEXT to the tragedy of losing one's hearing, the greatest shock comes from incorrectly selecting and using a hearing aid. This shock can be so great as to frighten the patient away from further and complete use of the hearing aid for very many years.

The flood of sounds, noises and voices which suddenly break into the consciousness of the person who has not heard them for years is very much like the first impact of direct sunlight on a person who has lived in a dungeon. It is therefore of serious importance that the person getting a hearing aid guard against "auditory shock" by understanding the stages through which he must travel, step by step, in relearning to hear.

First Steps

1. Many years before the patient notices that he is hard of hearing and has difficulty understanding speech at a distance, he has become deafened to such sounds as those of his own clothing and many ordinary noises at home and outside. The first thing the user of a hearing aid must get reaccustomed to is living again with those continuous noises. The best way of doing this is to use the hearing aid *while alone* in the house, as loud and long as possible, every day. The user should not take the hearing aid out of the house and must not wear it in very noisy places and crowds until these first steps are accomplished.

2. Sit down quietly, and turn the hearing aid on as loud as you can stand it. Do not attempt to talk to anyone. Just listen to the ordinary noises around you: the squeaking of a chair, doors opening, the

humming of the refrigerator, an automobile outside, etc. Listen to these noises and try to identify them. Every time you hear a sound, say to yourself: "This is a dog barking. This is the fan blowing," etc. Listening to music is extremely helpful in this period. As for speech on the radio, see No. 10 at the end of these instructions.

Keep the instrument on as loud and as long as possible under these circumstances. As soon as it begins to annoy or tire you, turn it down until it is a little more comfortably soft and wear it at this loudness as long as you can. You may read, knit, sew, or do any work that isn't too noisy during this first stage—and listen to the sound of the work you are doing. For example, a newspaper will make an awful clatter and sometimes sound like firecrackers. When you feel you've had enough, shut the instrument off but keep it in your ear as long as possible. *Do not permit yourself to become annoyed, nervous, or "headachey."* As soon as you feel rested, turn the hearing aid on a while longer. You will find that you can wear it a little longer each time. After several hours or days of use in this way, sitting down, you may try using the instrument while walking around.

When the ear piece begins to bother you, you may remove it, making sure that the volume control is turned off completely before putting the instrument away. As soon as you feel rested, you may put the instrument back on and repeat the performance.

3. Do not wear the hearing aid to talk to people until you are able to wear it turned on fairly loud for an hour or two while not talking to anyone. You must

become so accustomed to ordinary noises that you will not pay any attention to them when talking to a person. *Not until you take these noises for granted will you be able to concentrate on the voice you want to hear.*

4. You may now use the hearing aid talking to only one person. The rest of the family should be in another room. At first listen to the one person at a distance of six feet, gradually increasing the distance to fifteen feet. Increase the volume with the distance, if necessary. At each distance, ask the person to be sure to speak normally loudly, and slowly. (It is advisable to ask a third person—who must not speak—if the speaker *is* speaking normally.) Then adjust the volume control so that you can *just* hear the person comfortably—and *keep the volume control in that position. Do not fidget with and adjust the controls constantly.* Let your ears, attention, and the speaker change instead of the volume control.

When you get along perfectly talking to one person, you may try talking to the person while other people are talking, preferably in another room. It will take some time before you get so reaccustomed to hearing other people talk that you are not distracted by them while you talk to the one person you *want* to listen to.

Cross Conversation Difficult

5. Relearning to carry on a conversation with several people is a very difficult matter for several reasons: First, the hard of hearing person has talked only directly to one person for many years before procuring a hearing aid, so that he has lost the habit of participating in cross-conversation. Secondly, when a person loses hearing in one ear, the sense of direction of sound is also destroyed. In cross-conversation, it is therefore almost impossible for the hard of hearing person, with or without a hearing aid, to tell who is talking from the place the speaker occupies in the room. The only way of overcoming this difficulty is by identifying the voice and especially by keen concentration.

It must also be remembered that even with normal hearing we do not hear everybody at once in a group conversation, but that the ears and mind rapidly shift attention from one person to another as each speaks. In addition to losing the sense of direction and discrimination of voices, the hard of hearing person generally loses the speed of understanding. In a group conversation the rate of speaking is much more rapid than in speaking with one person. It therefore requires additional time to relearn to hear and understand rapidly. To state a truth frankly, many hearing aid users never learn to participate very comfortably in a group conversation. At best they learn to watch and concentrate on the one person they want most to hear and to wait until *that* person speaks. When this habit of *concentrating on one person at a time* grows, most people under sixty learn to get along pretty well in a group.

6. Do not take the hearing aid out of the house until you feel you have gotten along as well as you can with it under the circumstances described above. *You will not be able to hear better in another house than in your own home*, because there will be new sound problems and noises to readjust to. When you are ready to take the instrument out of the house, be sure that you have found a comfortable garment and way of wearing the hearing aid. It is important that the instrument should be fixed and not move or flop around thus creating additional extraneous noises.

Public Places

When you are ready to leave the house, you may have to turn the volume down a little in order to avoid the shock of excessive street noises. In some cases it is necessary to shut the instrument off entirely while on the street but it is far better to turn it down sufficiently to hear a murmur. This will prevent the shock of turning the instrument on suddenly when you reach your destination.

7. When you are perfectly adjusted to wearing the hearing aid in the homes of family and friends, then you may try it in

a public place: a movie, show, church, meeting, etc. The problem in a public place is generally one of acoustics, that is, the sound in a public place is far different from what it is in a house. And because the hard of hearing person has not heard under these circumstances for many years, it may require many trials before getting accustomed to such public places. The volume and tone control may have to be readjusted in these public places and it is advisable to try sitting in different parts of the same hall to discover the place where one hears best.

8. It is important to understand that you *must not* put the hearing aid away or turn it off until suddenly you find there is something *you want to hear*. If you turn on the hearing aid just when you want to hear that "special thing," the shock is often too much for comfortable use and concentration. Therefore, the instrument must be kept turned on and used, *even if you are not talking to a person, for at least five or six hours every day* if you want to get the maximum benefit from it when you *want* to talk to one or more people. *The longer you wear the hearing aid when you are not talking to people, the better you will be able to hear when you have to talk to them.*

9. The time required for each stage and the eight stages depends entirely on the individual case, the type and duration of deafness, and the age of the patient. Few can put a hearing aid on the moment they buy it and wear it comfortably for eighteen hours. The average period of readjustment is approximately six weeks, at the end of which time the patient may be able to wear the instrument constantly. Most patients relearn the first four stages in a week or so, but many find great difficulty with the later stages, especially folks over sixty-five. It is important to determine, with the help of the consultant, how much hearing you may *expect* to recover with the hearing aid and *what you may not be able to hear*. Only by discovering what you *cannot* do with a hearing aid can you be reasonably happy with it.

10. Because the radio is seldom as clear and natural as the direct single voice in the room, this additional distortion often makes it difficult for certain people to understand over the radio. Moreover, too many radio speakers talk too rapidly for good hearing.

To assist in listening to the radio, follow these instructions: (a) Have a member of the family tune the radio so that it is right for him at six feet. (b) Sit six feet away and adjust your hearing aid carefully. (c) You may not be able to understand speech immediately, therefore, listen to music at first and try to identify the different instruments and voices. (d) *Do not* attempt to listen to plays or several speakers. News commentators, speaking slowly and evenly, are best. Gabriel Heater and Kaltenborn have excellent voices for this purpose. Try to listen to them regularly. Your range of understanding may increase with time and practice.

11. The use of the hearing aid at work depends on the individual circumstances and should be discussed in detail.

Inattention

After a number of years of deafness, most people become a bit absentminded, at least as far as listening to sounds and speech is concerned. The reasons for this must be understood if the hard of hearing, their families and friends are to make the fullest adjustment with a hearing aid.

Since all sound comes to the hard of hearing much more faintly and dully than to normal ears, the reaction to sound is less quick and sharp. When one calls mother or father, the mother or father with normal hearing reacts and answers in a certain quick way. To deafened ears, that call is so faint and vague that the patient often is not certain that he or she has heard *anything*. In the first stages, the patient will tend to look around. After a number of years, especially if the hearing has become worse, the patient will not react at all to these sudden calls or noises, even though tests show that by paying close attention he can hear these sounds. In very old cases and people the full sound

and meaning of words are forgotten and it may require weeks or months with an aid before words are understood as rapidly as most people speak.

When it is no longer possible to understand in church, at a meeting or in a show, the patient of course stops going to these places. His attitude towards conversation is quite different. Since this is the last tie with the world of sound that affects those nearest and dearest to us most, the patient clings to this circle desperately. Rather than believe that this tie is cut, he will strain to listen and hear, even though it may bring on nervousness; and when this does not succeed the patient will *imagine* what he or she does not hear. In time, however, he realizes that this effort and strain are not worthwhile. The penalty is at first to withdraw mentally from the group—blankly or to a newspaper or sewing—and finally to get off physically in a corner or in another room by himself. When this final loneliness has become a tragedy—the deafened repeat to themselves: "What is the use of listening anyway?" After a number of years they *stop paying attention completely* except when a speaker is close or loud enough. It is difficult to realize that this inattention can become such a habit that, even when a hearing aid returns 50% or more hearing, the deafened must again learn to pay attention.

Those who have been hard of hearing for only a few years, especially if they are under sixty-five, generally relearn to react to sound and speech rapidly and normally with a hearing aid. Those with deafness of longer standing and those entering the seventies have a more difficult time, especially when someone speaks suddenly or changes the subject unexpectedly. The additional difficulty in these cases is due to the fact that *inattention gradually changes to absentmindedness*, or rather to living with one's thoughts. It requires considerable amplification of sound, the cooperation of family and friends, and readjustment on the part of the deafened to break this habit.

Don't Go Too Fast

Before any violent attempt is made to pull the patient out of himself, several things must be understood.

Few young people realize these hectic days that even with normal hearing it is natural, sometimes before the age of sixty-five, to become lost in one's thoughts and memories. The poets have written a great deal about this and have seen much that is right and beautiful in this living with the more vivid past. Deafness merely cuts off a little more of the impact of the present and outside world and adds to the temptation to live with one's thoughts.

Recent and younger cases can and should be broken of this habit as quickly as possible when they have procured a hearing aid. In the beginning, the easiest way of accomplishing this is for family and friends to avoid bursting out with a long, rapid and involved sentence, especially during the first few weeks of wearing an aid. Family and friends would help a great deal if they would follow these instructions: Before proceeding to tell "what's on your mind," *get the attention of the patient by first calling his name* and being certain that he is paying attention. If then the speaker will talk slowly, distinctly, and in short sentences, it should not take very many weeks before younger and more recent cases do not require this special consideration any longer and *become convinced that listening brings results*.

Older cases and individuals, however, except for the few who are unusually alert, require more patience and understanding on the part of family and friends. Sudden and loud noises are apt to upset those over sixty-five; jarring them out of their thoughts and reveries may be an actual cruelty. They can be weaned away from their deep memories, but it must be done with gentleness and great patience. If family and friends will come closer, call softly and then *wait a moment* or two until mother, father, granny or grandpa turns slowly and says "yes?" this last obstacle to attention, listening and understanding will be largely overcome.