

Say again: Hear! hear! boomers

The 'forever young' crowd's discovering it isn't, with the kind of hearing loss baby boomers once considered the lot of the 70-plus

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Think of hearing loss and it may conjure up the image of an aged grandparent leaning forward, cupping a hand behind one ear and shouting: "What did you say?"

While gradual loss of hearing is a common occurrence as we pile up the birthdays, it's no longer an affliction only of those in their senior years.

Baby boomers, that postwar demographic whose generational mantra could be summed up as "forever young," are also beginning to join the ranks of the hard of hearing -- and they don't like it one bit.

"Hearing loss, especially age-related hearing loss, is thought to be something that naturally happens as you grow older, people thinking older meaning 70-, 80-plus," says Richard Bowring, senior manager of programs for the Hearing Foundation of Canada.

"Now, baby boomers who are 40 and 50 are thinking, 'Well, I don't feel old. I don't look old. Therefore these things that happen to old people shouldn't be happening to me until I'm 80 or 90,'" says Mr. Bowring. "So they don't want to admit that they have a hearing loss."

Age-related hearing loss, or presbycusis, occurs when the roughly 15,000 hair cells in the cochlea of the inner ear are no longer as good as they once were at their job -- translating sound vibrations into signals that are transmitted to the brain.

Signs that one's sound sense is waning include the belief that people are mumbling, needing people to repeat themselves and having others complain that one has the TV or radio volume deafeningly high.

"It normally starts happening around 60 years of age," notes Mr. Bowring. "It's simply a matter that the hair cells in the cochlea have gone through their lifetime and they're being worn down, as it were."

Up to 40 per cent of Canadians older than 65 and about half of those 75-plus have presbycusis, but such statistics may need to be dialled back to a younger age as more boomers come out of the closet about hearing loss. A recent

U.S. survey suggests there is now 26 per cent more hearing loss among Americans aged 46 to 64, compared with their parents' generation.

"What has happened is that with baby boomers doing the whole rock 'n' roll generation thing and going to concerts and doing all the loud things they love to do, they have progressively damaged the hair cells in the cochlea, so that the hair cells have died earlier," Mr. Bowring says.

"So they are getting the hearing loss earlier and earlier. And in fact, it has been documented that the age shift for that has dropped around 20 years, so around the 40-year-old mark."

Losing one's hearing acuity in what many would consider the prime of life can be a terrible blow, especially when it comes to career aspirations.

Hearing consultant Gael Hannan recalls the story of a middle-aged, high-powered banker with reduced hearing who told audiologists that he wanted "the smallest hearing aids possible so that people wouldn't notice, because he did not want to lose power."

"That banker was the epitome of the baby boomer thing."

Ms. Hannan, an actress with long-term and progressive hearing loss who performs a one-woman show called *Unheard Voices* to raise awareness about the issue, concedes there has long been a stigma around hearing loss.

She says the thinking goes something like this: "I have hearing loss. I'm getting old. I'm not as capable as I once was. I'm not as effective. People will think less of me. I will appear foolish."

While she understands the subtleties of power in the boardroom -- "How am I going to be perceived on the job? Will this affect my chances of promotion? Will my employees think of me the same way?"-- trying to bluff about one's diminished hearing can actually backfire.

"People get it, they do notice. If we aren't up front, then they might make other assumptions," she says, including that the person really isn't competent to do his or her job.

Reluctance to address hearing loss can cause havoc in relations with family and friends as a battle ensues over who said what, as well as leading to personal distress, says Rex Banks, chief audiologist at the Canadian Hearing Society.

"Ultimately, it can lead to feeling depressed. We do know that hearing loss can cause isolation, frustration. You can experience anxiety over communicating because you know it's going to be a stressful situation."

What stops many people from getting help -- once they admit they have a hearing problem -- is the thought of wearing a hearing aid or other form of assistive hearing device.

While stories are rife about older people refusing to wear hearing aids because "they're too much trouble" or "they don't work," the truth is that they often work too well.

"What happens is a person will get a hearing aid and they immediately expect it will be like glasses, that you put your glasses on and you can see perfectly again," explains Mr. Bowring. "Hearing aids don't cure the problem, but they do help amplify the sound so you can hear it."

"Unfortunately, it amplifies *all* sounds."

Ms. Hannan recalls getting fitted for her first hearing aids years ago, and how the cacophony of sound initially drove her crazy.

"When you first get them, you can hear people cutting food a mile away," she says, laughing at the recollection. She could hear her own breathing; her footsteps sounded like an elephant marching.

Ms. Hannan, who's in her early 50s, stressed that it takes at least a month to get used to what seems like an onslaught of noise and to retrain the brain to pick out one type of sound while relegating others to the background.

For those who want to cover their ears at any suggestion they need a hearing aid, audiologists say we've come a long way from the ear trumpet and the more recent clunky, pinky-beige contraptions that hooked over the ear. Manufacturers have made hearing devices smaller, less obtrusive and customized to suit individual clients.

Ironically, it's likely the economically and socially powerful boomer generation that has led to advances in hearing aid technology, as manufacturers and retailers anticipate the next huge wave of customers.