

Hearing Aids Working In Quiet and In Noise

By Garth Brears

Perceptions:

- Myth#1: Hearing aids only work in quiet settings, and not at all in noisy environments.
- Myth#2: Hearing impaired persons can hear fine in quiet settings without the use of hearing aids.
- Myth #3: Individuals without hearing disability can hear fine in noisy settings.

Why do I believe these perceptions to be false? Let me explain.

First, what is a hearing loss?

(Please read the article entitled "What Is a Hearing Loss?")

In that article, I defined hearing loss as the inability to perceive a sound that you could formerly hear at the same distance. Therefore it is the gradual erosion of the ability to identify a sound at a distance.

Myth # 1: "Hearing aids do not work in noise."

Wrong. The simple answer is they work extremely well in noise; they pick up soft sounds at far away distances very well. However, restoring the ability to identify sounds at distances is not the sole answer; a hearing impaired person wants and needs to understand conversations better.

Wearing hearing aids in noise can make understanding very difficult, because after all, it makes it harder to focus with all the extra sound that is brought in by the hearing aid. Hearing aids allow for more hearing, not better focus. Focus is essential in order to understand what you want to hear in a noisy environment.

Example: Glasses improve vision, but they do not tell you what to look at.

Focus takes rehabilitation, which takes time. Persons with a hearing impairment have no idea how to react or cope with the abundance of sounds they are now receiving. After all, they likely have spent the last ten years unconsciously learning coping skills for having poor hearing, not good hearing.

Myth # 2: "I don't need my hearing aids when it's quiet. I hear fine without them."

Wrong again. In a quiet setting, most will recognize that they understand better than they do in noise, with or without hearing aids. This does not mean that they hear fine in quiet, it simply means that they can cope effectively in quiet. In truth, it is because these coping strategies are unconscious that the person believes they can hear without a hearing aid.

Myth #3: "Persons with normal hearing have no trouble hearing in noisy settings."

Wrong. I cannot hear a bird out my living room window if I am playing a stereo in my living room. Therefore, in fact, I become hearing impaired to softer sounds when louder sounds are present. This same phenomena occurs every time I am in a noisy room. The confusing part is that when a person with normal hearing walks into a room full of noise, they continue to understand much of the conversation in front of them. They are not hearing the entire conversation; rather, they are seamlessly using coping strategies which allow them to understand what is being said.

In Conclusion:

It is critical to understand that the human body does its best to maintain equilibrium in all ways. If we lose hearing, we increase focus (and use better compensation strategies) when listening to speech.

If you wait ten years before fixing the lack of sound to the brain, then add a hearing aid which brings in all sorts of sounds literally with the click of a switch, the brain screams "OVERLOAD". Like all things it needs time to re-adjust to change.

This process makes it very hard to focus even in quiet places initially and especially in noisy places. The good news is that the vast majority of people, even after waiting years to do something about the hearing loss, will regain focus and conclude that the hearing aids really do help, but they often recognize the improvements only in quiet. Regaining focus in noise remains a challenge for many.

Having said this, virtually all my patients do better in noise while wearing hearing aids. If this sounds like a contradiction, please read the article entitled:

"Something To Consider About Noise!"