

Are you a Saboteur?

by Garth Brears, M.S., Aud(C) Clinical Audiologist

Do you often think, "If it wasn't for the background noise, I would hear just fine?" As an Audiologist, I often ask the patient in my office what kinds of noise they find it difficult to hear in. Fairly standard responses include "other people talking," or "music playing while I am listening to someone speak," or "the sound of my tires when I am in the car," or "a cash register." However, these examples are not what a standard dictionary would define as noise, so I wondered if "background noise" is not any one thing, but rather just about "anything" that distracts the listener from being able to hear the speaker.

I would like to suggest you try this exercise. Have two family members talk to you at the same time, and listen to both of them, being equally as attentive to both, if you can. I would then like to get your opinion on how well you understood them. My guess is that you will say "Not very well." Could it be that you could not focus on two things at the same time, and as a result you understood neither very well?

Now, try having them both talk at the same time, but actually watch one of them and listen to that person only. I would again ask you how well you understood them. Likely, you would say, "better." Why do you think this is? Could it be that you "listened" and focused long enough to actually "understand?" Now the clincher is, while you were paying attention to the person you *were* listening to, was the other person "background noise" or did they become part of the woodwork, much like listening to a train pass your house for the 10,000 time? If they were "background noise," that may be an indication you were not listening very well.

Is anything sounding familiar yet? Could the reason many people complain about "background noise" interrupting their concentration be that those same people are actually also "listening" to many of the things they are calling background noise? If you think that is impossible, I would like you to try another exercise. Ask a family member to talk to you, but this time try NOT to listen to them. I think you will find that what happened was that you actually "heard" the person and understood them, despite trying not to listen. How is this possible when I asked you not to listen to them? Maybe it was because there was nothing else to listen to. Turn on the radio to a regular volume, put

it three feet in front of you and slightly to the left, and ask your family member to again tell you a story while standing three feet in front of you and slightly to the right. DO NOT listen to them, but rather listen to the radio. Now what happened? Most likely, you still, more or less, heard the family member. Maybe that is because I asked you *not* to do it.

Now imagine you are going to go to a place where you *know* there will be many different sounds, where it may be difficult to hear the person across the table from you. What do you think your brain is telling you before you get there? Perhaps it is telling you not to listen to any of those sounds, because, if you do, you will have a terrible time trying to hear the other person. So what occurs when you actually go to the event? You may have a horrible experience, just like you told yourself ahead of time. In fact, all you heard all night was "BACKGROUND NOISE." Now, here is my question, "What were you *listening* to all night??" Was it actually the people you hoped to hear, or was it all the sounds your brain told you ahead of time not to listen to? It is a bit tragic how we have a tendency to do just exactly what we are not supposed to do, even if it means sabotaging our ability to comprehend when we really need it.

"Actively listening" is a form of aural rehabilitation, much like a physical therapist may suggest strength exercises for a bad back. Like so many things, we take our ability to just listen to one thing at a time completely for granted. But can we afford this luxury? Based on the amount of complaints I receive about "background noise," the answer is, probably not. Losing your ability to listen to one thing over another does not have to diminish just because your hearing acuity has lessened. In fact, the better that you try to discriminate between speakers by *actively listening*, the more you offset your *inability to actually hear* because of your hearing loss.

Talk to your Audiologist or Registered Hearing Aid Practitioner. Ask for help if you think that you are having a hard time "listening," since, believe it or not, there are exercises for this. And, yes, "listening" is very different than "hearing."