

Activity: Hearing loss and dementia

Hearing loss is often referred to as an invisible disability. Unless a person wears a hearing aid or other device that is easily seen, their hearing loss may not be readily detected.

This activity will encourage you to put yourself in the shoes of someone who has hearing loss and think about how hearing loss affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with other people.

Imagine you have hearing loss and cannot hear what is being said to you.

How would you react the first time you couldn't hear?

Would you pull a face? What would that face look like? What would you say?

Would you lean forward to hear what was being said?

If you would ask the person to repeat themselves, how would you react the second, third, fourth time they repeated themselves and you still couldn't hear?

How many times would you ask a person to repeat themselves before giving up?

If this kept happening would you avoid these situations?

Would you try to hide your hearing loss from others? How would you do this?

What other problems might you experience?

Now think about what this means for recognising people with hearing loss. How might you recognise that a person you are supporting has hearing loss?

It is so important to be alert to these signs and encourage people with hearing loss to seek help. This is especially important if a person is already living with dementia and having difficulty making sense of the world around them.

Trainer's notes

This activity asks participants to imagine what it is like to have a hearing loss, then think about what this means for them in future when they are looking for signs of hearing loss.

The activity will work best with groups of two to eight people. It involves role play, brainstorming and discussion, so encourage participants to share whatever they are thinking. It can be made even more effective if the participants are given ear plugs to wear. A flip chart or note pad would be useful for taking notes and summarising what the group has discussed.

To the final part of the activity – asking what this means for recognising other people with hearing loss – these could be some of the responses offered:

- no response if spoken to unless looking at speaker
- looks confused or blank
- wears a hearing aid
- has difficulty hearing on telephone
- cups hand behind ear towards person speaking
- turns one ear towards person speaking
- leans forward and watches person speaking intently
- difficulty in communicating in groups and noisy places
- shouts (or whispers) and speech may be unclear
- misunderstandings and inappropriate responses.

Encourage discussion about why hearing loss is not always recognised.

Points which may emerge:

- People with hearing loss may still respond to sounds, even though they may have difficulty understanding speech.
- They may be able to hear and understand in some situations, for example, when speaking with one person in a quiet place.
- They may lip-read well, so compensating for the hearing loss.
- People may be unaware of a gradually increasing hearing loss as some hearing loss is accepted as normal (“What do you expect at your age?”).
- People may not know what signs to look for.
- Institutionalisation can mask hearing loss: people follow others, see visual clues and become familiar with a routine.
- Misunderstandings, wrong answers, inattentiveness and the like may be wrongly put down to other causes such as dementia.