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Tuesday, October 9, 2012

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Commentary

October 8, 2012

Let's Break the Silence on Hearing Loss



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Kathleen S. Roufs

"I think my avoidance of social contexts with my colleagues is interpreted as social withdrawal, reticence, or disinterest, rather than what it mostly is: embarrassment that I cannot follow conversations in a crowded environment. So, I 'beg off' or not show up."

That comment was made by one of 84 faculty members who said, in a study conducted last year at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, that they had experienced some degree of hearing loss. The hypothesis was that many faculty members with hearing loss just bear up in silence, in a silent world, and the study confirmed it. In fact, that number is probably quite low. We have no way of knowing how many hearing-impaired faculty members did not respond to the survey, but if their number reflects that of the general population (as one would expect), it would be closer to 500.

One academician suggested that she did not feel free to discuss her hearing loss until she became a department head and had tenure. Another said he felt a total lack of sensitivity to the issue among the faculty and administrators with whom he interacts.

Although we may all know about support services for students with hearing loss, and where to find those resources, support for faculty with hearing loss, for many, is not commonly a priority. How faculty members responded in the study confirmed that too many educators are coping silently with hearing impairments.

With the exception of those who wore obvious hearing devices, 63 percent of the respondents said that none of their colleagues were aware of their hearing loss. This leads one to surmise that many faculty members—like the study participant who said, "I would never reveal my hearing loss to colleagues"—simply do not disclose their condition, even to those with whom they work.

Two-thirds of hearing losses among the study participants occurred after the age of 46, suggesting that age-induced hearing loss is a reality for many. It is both alarming and heartbreaking to think that faculty members with hearing loss fear they will be judged by their hearing limitations, rather than their intellectual contributions. As one respondent said, "I'm pretty good at lip reading and faking it."

We need to put "find solutions for hearing-impaired faculty members" on our institutional agendas. As our faculty members are graying (the number of professors age 65 and older more than doubled from 2000 to 2011), the number with hearing loss is growing. Approximately 17 percent of American adults admit to some degree of hearing loss, and there is a direct correlation with age: The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders reports that 18 percent of people 45 to 64 years old, 30 percent of those 65 to 74 years old, and 47 percent of those 75 years old or older are hearing impaired.

What should we do? As individuals, once we know that faculty members with hearing loss are among us, we should adopt some simple behavioral changes to begin to include them more fully in academic life. For example, when interacting with a hearing-impaired person whose back is to you, tap the person on the shoulder to get his or her attention. Don't talk with your hand over your mouth. Make eye contact with the person when you are speaking. Don't expect the person to participate in gatherings with background noises (hearing-impaired people frequently say they can only pretend to follow conversations in noisy spaces). And don't mumble.

The stigma associated with hearing loss is one reason for educators' reluctance to talk about it. But another common reason is that faculty members worry about costing their departments money if they request assistance in combating their hearing challenges.

"It boils down to resources," said one study participant, echoing the sentiments of many others. "If I bring this up, is the department then obligated to spend money on resources for me? If resources are spent to assist me with hearing loss, then will others feel resentment towards me?" Yet this is a largely unfounded fear, since money to assist the hearing impaired typically comes from the disability-services or human-resources departments. What's more, many of the institutional accommodations that can be made are not all that expensive. For example:

- Remodeled and new construction could include induction looping, a relatively inexpensive, invisible system of transmission made for telecoil-equipped hearing aids and cochlear implants. Loops work by receiving sound, filtering the background noise, and relaying the sound directly to the hearing devices. The University of Minnesota at Duluth is looping classrooms and lecture halls as the spaces are upgraded or constructed. The loops conform to Americans With Disabilities Act requirements for hearing disabilities; require little, if any, maintenance; and entail no additional headphones or neckpieces.
- Classrooms and meeting rooms could be made more conducive to better hearing with simple acoustical modifications such as using carpet, cloth drapes, fabric-covered room dividers, and other "soft" surfaces.
- Seating could be arranged to allow faculty members with hearing loss to engage more effectively by accommodating situations like one-sided hearing loss, and by encouraging closer interaction between the faculty member and students or colleagues to improve hearing comprehension.
- Telephone systems could offer options from simple amplification to devices that translate the conversation into readable captions, either on the phone or on a computer screen.
- Rectangular conference tables could be replaced with oval ones to allow better eye contact and easier lip reading for all participants.

Jane E. Brody, the Personal Health columnist for *The New York Times*, wrote earlier this year, "Hearing loss, a disability currently untreated in about 85 percent of those affected, may be the nation's most damaging and costly sensory handicap." She's right, and it's high time that we helped our colleagues move out of their silent worlds.n

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- The Chronicle of Higher Education
- 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W.
- Washington, D.C. 20037