

# The impact of hearing loss: Dealing with silence and noise

Hearing loss is not simply a medical matter, but more a communication impairment with social ramifications that have a significant impact on your personal life and career. Tim Hart, a senior research project manager at the HSRC, spoke to the *HSRC Review* about the sacrifices and positive choices that he has made to live with profound hearing disability.

He is completely deaf in his right ear and has very limited hearing in his left where he wears a hearing aid. Therefore, Tim Hart tries to place colleagues on his left side when they talk.

“However, when some see the hearing device, an entertaining shuffle ensues. I try to get them to talk into my left ear, but they only want to talk into the ear without the hearing aid, wrongly assuming that it is the functioning ear,” he describes the interaction.

The clumsy response of some colleagues is most probably the consequence of their ignorance about his disability, rather than intended disregard. Most peers are supportive but occasional encounters have been downright rude.

“An executive director got so frustrated with my inability to follow a teleconference that this individual told me to get my ears cleaned and my hearing aid serviced. I received an apology later, but this is why I can empathise with people who feel too intimidated to disclose their disabilities,” says Hart.

## Launching a career

Diagnosed as totally deaf in his right ear at the age of four, Hart also lost 75% of the hearing in his left ear at the end of his second year at university. He still completed his degree the following year, then an honours degree in social anthropology at the University of Cape Town in 1991 and a master’s degree (*cum laude*) in sociology at Stellenbosch University in 2003.

Hart read various social science subjects, initially choosing psychology, but his interest soon shifted toward anthropology.

“Its approach provides the most robust way of understanding human behaviour in transition. My honours year introduced me to the complex world of development and I was hooked.

Many people still think that hearing impairment is a medical disability and do not accept the significance of the social and physical environment.

“In 2004, I started as a senior research manager at the HSRC doing lots of fieldwork-based research and regularly presenting at seminars and conferences. As an ethnographer, planning and conducting interviews are some of my most important skills. By 2010, I had lost another 10% of my hearing and spent five years trying to get my role changed toward more desktop research,” says Hart.

## Adapting

As a senior research project manager with 25 years’ experience in managing project teams, he is acutely aware of the sacrifices and compensation that his disability requires of him.

“I have had to reduce my presence at conferences and seminars, which is career limiting and decreases networking opportunities. Large groups of people convene in large venues without the necessary technology to assist people with profound hearing impairment. This absence means that I miss most of the presentations and sometimes misunderstand questions. The surprise on people’s faces can be quite embarrassing.

“Most delegates can digest recent scientific ideas from the presentations. I cannot and must do a lot more reading to remain abreast. I organise that I only attend very small meetings in small rooms and position myself so that I can hear as much as possible.”

## Misconceptions

Many people do not realise that every impairment is different, says Hart. They do not know how to respond or they make clumsy suggestions to solve the problem from their limited perspective.

“Some years ago, when I lost more hearing, the employer’s response was that I should get a cochlear implant, simply because they had heard it was a technological breakthrough. Without knowing my situation, they thought this would solve everybody’s problems, including my progressive hearing loss. Despite the progress in hearing aids, they simply serve to amplify sound and this includes background noise, such as air conditioners, people talking or the clattering of crockery. In an increasingly cosmopolitan world, hearing aids do not assist with clearly



Tim Hart doing fieldwork on indigenous knowledge with rural residents in eastern Limpopo

understanding accents that different people have. This is where subtitles and voice to text technologies (very much in its infancy) can help.”

### **Social isolation versus integration**

Hart says living with hearing loss has social ramifications that can lead to significant frustration and isolation.

“Many people still think that hearing impairment is a medical disability and do not accept the significance of the social and physical environment. Some show sympathy, which is not what we want. Hearing impairment can socially exclude you if you let it. I still have to remind my family that I cannot hear them when they talk to me without looking at me.”

Modern society has embraced open-plan spaces in offices, banks and other public areas, but they frustrate people who are hearing impaired, says Hart.

“There is so much background noise in these open areas that it makes hearing virtually impossible. While normal telephone communication is a challenge, the noise from call centres is transmitted and impedes communication. Where I can and people are willing, I try to communicate with individuals in closed office spaces or via email.

I do not go to the cinema, but watch DVDs and channels such as Netflix where they use subtitles. I often ask my partner to repeat the news to me when I miss something. When I go to a restaurant, I try to find the quietest corner to sit in and let my partner do the ordering if I cannot hear the waitron.”

### **Workplace challenges**

According to Hart, organisations need to respect the diverse needs of people with disabilities, which require individual rather than universal solutions.

“When it comes to reasonable accommodation and access, public and private sector organisations focus mainly on those who are confined to wheelchairs. In all my years of employment for different organisations, not one has had the facilities for hearing or visually impaired people. Only one university had a lecture room with facilities for the hearing impaired, whereas NGOs in the disability sector make sure they have all the facilities for people with disabilities and ensure that these are made available at their conferences and seminars.

“Employers also need to prioritise programmes and career paths for people with disabilities, particularly

when these are progressive, and must include disability rights awareness programmes for staff. People within organisations who have impairments should consider forming peer support networks.”

### **Staying positive**

Acceptance and tapping into support networks are crucial to living with a disability, says Hart.

“New technologies that assist people have increased, but these are limited for those with hearing impairment and are costly. You need to adjust your environment as best as you can to ensure that you can function optimally. A portion of these expenses may be tax deductible, so explore that.

“Also, try to understand your disability as best you can. Never let it get you down to the point where you cannot accept it as part of your life. Be aware of how your disability affects you and make positive choices to ensure that you do not succumb to the emotional aspects of it. Where possible, try to avoid events that trigger feelings of helplessness.”