

Realistic Expectations: A Key to Success

Although sometimes overlooked with today's focus on technology, establishing realistic patient expectations is an essential part of the counseling and educational component of dispensing hearing instruments. For individuals whose hearing loss has progressed to the degree that amplification is required, a critical factor in the acceptance of, and success with, hearing instruments is a set of realistic expect-

ations. Further, the more damage that has occurred within the auditory system (i.e., the greater the hearing loss), the more difficult it becomes to restore capabilities that once existed.

With those limitations acknowledged, it becomes equally important to recognize that not all hearing instruments are alike in terms of their performance or their ability to correct certain aspects of hearing loss. Just as differences exist in the performance of computers,

automobiles, etc., a wide range of hearing instrument technology that yields different levels of performance is similarly available. In the case of automobiles, the most basic models will get you where you want to go, but it may be a bumpy, tiresome, uncomfortable ride; on the other hand, more advanced models with more features, can actually make driving a very enjoyable experience. Parallel comparisons can be drawn for hearing instruments. In contrast to basic linear instruments, newer technology incorporating sophisticated signal processing, program-

mability and multiple memories is generally acknowledged as providing improved sound quality, speech understanding, and ease of use, as well as a more comfortable listening experience across a variety of environments.³

Recognizing that the capabilities of the biological system and hearing instrument technology interact in a complex equation that ultimately dictates patient performance, the statements in Table 1 offer a basic set of "realistic expectations" for hearing instrument users. It should be emphasized that these generalizations will apply to varying degrees, depending upon the type and severity of the hearing loss and the hearing instrument technology in use. In general, however, they represent widely applicable guidelines for the majority of hearing instrument users.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that certain listening conditions present a significant challenge to speech understanding, even for individuals with normal hearing. Social gatherings, parties or noisy restaurants represent situations where it is often difficult to clearly understand conversation, independent of hearing loss. However, as the degree of hearing loss increases, these types of situations become more problematic. Depending upon the hearing instruments worn, speech understanding in these circumstances may be helped or hindered by the use of amplification. These environments present difficult conditions in which to communicate for all participants, and the hearing instrument user must recognize and accept

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Despite today's advances in hearing science and the development of sophisticated hearing instruments, the setting of realistic expectations for the client remains critical to the success of any hearing instrument fitting. The following offers guidelines and recommendations for establishing client goals.

tations. As the cumulative effects of aging and noise exposure on the inner ear progress, the ability to restore lost function through the use of amplification becomes more difficult. From a functional perspective, it is well recognized that sensorineural hearing loss represents far more than a mere threshold shift. Frequency selectivity, temporal processing, central nervous system control and myriad other physiological processes are altered in the hearing-impaired ear.^{1,2} It is important that the patient and the clinician are aware of these factors and have a mutual understanding of the limitations they impose.

For example, no one (over the age of 30, at least) would expect that a new design of athletic shoe could make them run as fast, or jump as high, as they did as a teenager. Inevitable biological changes make that level of performance nearly impossible to attain, even with the help of new technology. In much the same way, hearing instruments, no matter how technically advanced, will restore only some degree of the hearing capacity that has



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Table 1: Realistic Expectations for Hearing Instrument Use*Hearing Instruments...*

- ▶ Should allow you to hear many sounds that you may not be able to hear, or may not hear clearly, without amplification. Examples of such sounds include soft speech, children's voices and other quiet sounds.
- ▶ Should allow you to understand speech more clearly, and with less effort, in a variety of listening situations.
- ▶ Should prevent normally loud sounds from becoming uncomfortably loud. Sounds that are uncomfortably loud for normal hearing individuals may also be uncomfortable when using hearing instruments.
- ▶ May allow you to understand speech more clearly in some types of noisy situations.
- ▶ Will require time to get used to, and to attain your maximum performance potential as you gradually become accustomed to amplification.
- ▶ WILL NOT restore your hearing capabilities to "normal" or to pre-existing levels.
- ▶ WILL NOT "filter out" background noise. Some hearing instruments can reduce amplification of some types of background noise, but may have a similar effect on speech information. Nonetheless, this will often produce improved sound quality and a more comfortable listening experience in many types of noisy environments. ■

that reality. Most listeners subconsciously focus more attention on the speaker and rely on speech reading cues in these situations; it is even more important for the hearing instrument user to actively employ these communication strategies.⁴ *A simple guideline: as the listening conditions deteriorate, so too does the ability of a hearing instrument to compensate for lost auditory function.* In quiet, many users of amplification are able to attain performance levels equal to normal listeners. As the difficulty of the listening task increases, however, the disparity in performance between individuals with normal hearing and those with hearing loss grows, and that disparity increases with the severity of the hearing loss.⁵

Setting realistic expectations is an important component in achieving success with any hearing instruments. Programmable instruments represent a particularly special case due to patient expectations of high performance and anticipation that repeated programming modifications will result in continual improvement. It is critical with advanced technology instruments that the patient and the clinician understand and agree upon reasonable objectives. By mutually agreeing upon these expectations, both parties have a concrete set of goals to work towards, and a realistic framework to work within. ■

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Hearing care professional: "Well, Mr. Smith, that should do it for this initial fitting. Everything with your new hearing instruments seem to check out just fine. I'd like you to wear these for at least a week and then come back in for a recheck. We'll see how you did and make any adjustments, if necessary."

Mr. Smith: "Thank you. These really do sound better than my old ones. But...I hope that they are worth the additional cost. I expect that I'll really notice a big difference at dinner in a noisy restaurant."

Hearing care professional: "You may, Mr. Smith. We'll have to see."

Mr. Smith: "If I don't, you can adjust them and fix that...right?"

Hearing care professional: "We can certainly try. I expect that these hearing instruments will help you hear much better in a variety of situations. Keep in mind that no hearing instruments are going to remove background noise, but these should have better sound quality and be more comfortable in those situations than your previous aids. That should make it much easier to function in the restaurant. Please take a copy of these 'Realistic Expectations' home with you. Give me a call if you have any questions."

Mr. Smith: "Well, I'm not expecting miracles, just some help where I have been having problems."

Hearing care professional: "I think we'll be able to achieve that."