

## PATIENT INFORMATION

# Difficulty Listening

## Information, Tips and Advice for Adults

This leaflet is aimed at individuals that have had a hearing test which showed normal hearing levels but are still experiencing difficulties with hearing.

**You may have come across or have had mentioned by a health professional the term 'auditory processing disorder' (APD). Currently in the UK there is no agreed consensus for testing to assess or diagnose APD. We can only give advice and recommendations.**

The first part of this leaflet explains how we hear and factors that can affect it. The second part provides some management advice.

### How we hear

It is not just ears that help us hear, it is also the brain. Sound is picked up by the ears which then travels through the hearing pathway (through the outer, middle and inner ear) and then up the auditory nerve to the brain. The brain then needs to interpret the sound it has received.

Hearing and listening are two distinct processes. Hearing is a passive process. This is the ability to pick up a sound. Listening is an active process. To listen we need to focus and filter information by differentiating, identifying and understanding the sounds that have been heard. The brain then needs to decide whether it needs to respond to this sound.

The brain will try to filter out sounds that it deems not important in a particular situation, but this can be impacted by different factors.

This entire process is called 'auditory processing'. Everyone's auditory processing ability is different.

Example of processing difficulties:

- Struggling to hear clearly in background noise or in group situations.
- Mishearing when speaking to someone unfamiliar.
- Struggling to hear clearly when using the telephone.
- Asking people to repeat what they have said.
- Taking longer to respond to information when heard.
- Finding it difficult to locate where sound is coming from.
- Have difficulty enjoying or following music.

If you are told you have normal hearing after a hearing test it means that your ears can pick up quiet sounds and the hearing pathway is functioning normally. The hearing test can't show how the brain processes sound.

There are different factors that can affect anyone's auditory processing ability.

## **Age**

As we get older the brain's processing ability may slow down. This can occur with or without hearing loss. Therefore, someone who hasn't experienced processing difficulties previously may find it is harder to process sound as they get older.

## **Background Noise**

Hearing in background noise is a tricky environment that anyone can struggle to hear in. Competing noises in the same environment can impact on the brain's ability to filter out the relevant information needed to hear clearly.

In high levels of background noise, it can also mask the soft clarity sounds that are needed to hear clearly.

Examples of background noise:

- Café, restaurant or pub
- A noisy street or road
- At home in the kitchen whilst cooking
- At home having a conversation with the TV or radio on

## **Environment**

Room acoustics can also impact on processing ability.

Rooms that have hard furnishing like tables and chairs, hard flooring and bare surfaces make it harder to hear. Soft furnishings like rugs, cushions and carpet can absorb the sound making the acoustics better.

Places that may have poor acoustics

- Classrooms
- Factories
- Hospitals
- Open plan offices
- Places of worship
- Supermarkets

Wearing masks and the use of partitions and screens in offices, supermarkets and hospitals (to name a few) can also reduce the transmission of the clarity of speech, making it harder to understand what is being said.

The distance between speakers can also impact on how well the clarity is received. The greater the distance the harder it is to pick up the important speech sounds.

## **Stress, concentration and tiredness**

To listen we need to be able to concentrate.

Tiredness, fatigue and energy levels can all play a part on how well sound is processed.

Some people may notice that their processing ability is worse at the end of a busy day when they are more tired. Some people may find chronic pain or long-term health conditions may impact on the brain's ability to concentrate.

Stress and anxiety also play a role in how well sound and speech is processed.

It is quite common for people to feel stressed and anxious when they cannot hear well but this can make the processing worse. When someone is stressed or anxious it means there are less resources available for the brain to differentiate, identify and understand the sounds that have been heard, meaning speech can sound can be harder to pick up.

## **Avoidance**

It is common for people to start to avoid situations that they find more difficult to hear in, especially if this causes distress.

This may lead to anxiety when presented with specific listening environments but can also affect quality of life if people end up missing out on social engagements.

Reducing the time spent in more difficult listening environments can make it harder for the brain to process sound when it can't avoid these situations. Auditory processing benefits from exposure to difficult listening environments and the more practice the brain has at hearing in these situations the better it will get.

## **Management Strategies**

There are different ways to help manage auditory processing difficulties.

## **Communication Tactics**

Below are some examples of communication tactics that can be used:

- Face the person you are speaking to. We all use lip reading and facial expressions to help us to listen
- In a busy environment try and find a quieter corner or sit/stand with your back against a wall to minimise background sound
- If you have not understood what has been said ask the speaker to rephrase. You can also repeat back to the speaker what you have heard and then ask a specific question about the part you missed so you are only receiving the information that you need
- Tell people you are struggling to hear; they too may also be experiencing the same thing. No one hears correctly all the time
  
- Ask people to get your attention first before speaking either by saying your name, tapping you etc
- Ask people to speak clearly and at a slightly slower rate to allow time for comprehension and it gives you enough time to think and respond
- Ask people to 'chunk' the information together and pause between each 'chunk' to allow for comprehension
  
- If you are struggling with the TV subtitles can help as they provide visual cues.
- When talking in the home environment try to turn down or turn off TV, radio when having conversations
  
- When going out to café's, restaurants, pubs etc think about the acoustics of the place. Places that have more soft furnishing will improve the acoustics of that room
- In meetings, lectures etc try to sit closer to the speaker and the further someone is away from you the harder it is to hear

## **Lipreading classes**

Lipreading can be a useful skill to develop to help you follow conversations.

Local classes

Jasmyn House – please contact Bevis Taylor for information about current classes (see end of leaflet for address and contact details)

[bevistaylor@nhs.net](mailto:bevistaylor@nhs.net) or 01803 219782

## Websites

<https://lipreadingpractice.co.uk>

## Relaxation and Mindfulness

If you are feeling overwhelmed in a listening situation, take yourself out of that situation for a short while.

Having coping strategies in place when feeling stressed can help calm the nervous system. Relaxation and mindfulness techniques can be useful to try. Practices such as Pilates, yoga, tai chi and qi gong can help with relaxation. Have a look around your local area to see if there are any local classes. Alternatively, YouTube usually has free practices that can be accessed. Please consult your GP before starting new forms of exercise.

There are different apps and websites that can help with relaxation and mindfulness exercises:

- Torbay and South Devon NHS Trust – Learning to Relax (website) – [www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/pain-service/reconnect2life/creating-skills-for-the-future/learning-relaxation-skills](http://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/pain-service/reconnect2life/creating-skills-for-the-future/learning-relaxation-skills)
- Torbay and South Devon NHS Trust – Yoga & Pilates (website) - [www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/pain-service/reconnect2life/improving-health-and-fitness/support-videos/](http://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/pain-service/reconnect2life/improving-health-and-fitness/support-videos/)
- NHS mindfulness (website) [www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness](http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness)
- Free Mindfulness (website) – [www.freemindfulness.org/download](http://www.freemindfulness.org/download)
- Every mind matters (website) – [www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/](http://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/)
- Smiling Mind (app) – can have free access
- Plum Village (app) – free access
- Insight Timer (app) – free version but there is also a paid access version
- Calm (app) – 1 week free trial and then need to subscribe for access
- Headspace (app) – try for free but then need to subscribe for access

If you would like support with mental health or stress levels you can access support through Devon's talking therapy service, TalkWorks ([www.talkworks.dpt.nhs.uk](http://www.talkworks.dpt.nhs.uk)). This is a self-referrable service.

Looking after our general well-being can also help with reducing stress.

## Auditory Training

Unfortunately, there isn't a quick fix but you can practice your listening skills which may help to improve your listening in noisy environments.

- **Listening Walks** – take a walk and start to bring your awareness to the sounds that are going around you. Try to identify the sounds you can hear. Try and locate where the sound is coming from without using any visual cues and then check to see if you are correct.
- **Background Noise Conversations** – practice listening in background noise. Have a conversation with someone and introduce background noise, such as turning on the TV, radio or playing music. Start off introducing this at a low

level where you can still hear the conversation clearly and then gradually increase the level.

- **Listening to songs** – pick a song you really like and listen to it very carefully, trying to pick up on every word. You can also listen for and pick out a particular instrument.
- **Audio Books** – try listening to short story audio books that are in a different accent to what you are used to. Accents are more challenging, so your brain needs to work harder to distinguish the words.
- **Reading or Crosswords** – try reading or doing crosswords with the radio on to get used to blocking sound out when concentrating.
  
- Hearoes (app) – some free content but do need to pay to access it all
- Eargym (app) – limited free access but do need to pay to access it all
- Elephant memory training by acoustic pioneer (PC, iPad, android tablet)
- Brain HQ (website) – [www.brainhq.com](http://www.brainhq.com) – some free exercises but need to pay to access it all
- LACE AI Pro (app) but need to access it via a LACE provider and there is a high price point

## Equipment

Some people may find additional equipment useful. These are not available on the NHS. The following websites provide further information about different equipment:

RNID – information and support – technology and products

([www.rnid.org.uk/information-and-support/technology-and-products](http://www.rnid.org.uk/information-and-support/technology-and-products))

Hearing dogs for deaf people – assistive technology

([www.hearingdogs.org.uk/support/living/assistive-technology](http://www.hearingdogs.org.uk/support/living/assistive-technology))

Connevans is a website where you can purchase different hearing technology

([www.connevans.co.uk](http://www.connevans.co.uk))

Examples of equipment and devices that may help:

- Using subtitles on the TV.
- Check your TV settings to set the treble sounds higher (this is where we get the clarity of speech) and some TV's have speech enhancement settings.
- TV listeners.
- Speech to text apps which convert speech to written text.
- Sound amplifier apps turn your smartphone into a microphone and can be used with headphones to boost audio and reduce background noise. For people with AirPods you can activate a live listen feature which turns the phone into a microphone. When using sound amplifier apps please keep in mind the more you reduce background noise the less practice your brain has hearing in background noise and could potentially make this harder when you do need to hear in background noise.

We also have local sensory team that can help with information about different equipment:

Jasmyn House - 1 Midvale Road, Paignton, TQ4 5BD.

Tel: 01803 551846

Mobile: 07876 398194

Opening hours:

Tuesday, 10am to 4pm; Wednesday, 10am to 4pm; Thursday, 10am to 4pm

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For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.

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