



Gitte Engelund Ph.D.

Identifying the Time for Improved Hearing

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Gitte Engelund Ph.D., research audiologist at Oticon's Eriksholm Research Centre in Denmark, recently (2006) published her dissertation entitled "Time For Hearing: Recognising Process for the Individual." Some of its key concepts and findings are presented below.

Introduction

Dr. Engelund revealed that hearing impaired individuals generally engage in a recognition process that prepares them to accept amplification. This process is initiated at an unconscious level and is often unrecognisable to the individual. However, as their hearing loss increases, and the condition and related negative manifestations become apparent, they become more prepared to seek and accept professional help in the form of hearing aids and related technology. If professionals intercede before the patient is ready to explore and accept amplification, the chances of success diminish.

Overview

Engelund's research was founded on formal interviews with 14 individuals, informal discussions, clinical experience and a review of the literature. Dr. Engelund identified milestones and commonalities throughout the process. The process is a continuum in which hearing impaired individuals need to participate in order to self-initiate a solution and to benefit from their own desire to effectively manage their hearing loss. Naturally, if they are not convinced they have a significant hearing loss, they are unlikely to acquire hearing aids or other technologies proven to be of benefit. Therefore, if the individual does not self-identify as a person with hearing problems and does not traverse the continuum, they are unlikely to seek or welcome solutions to problems they neither recognise nor acknowledge.

Engelund noted that there was a time when people sought solutions and essentially declared "It's time for me to do something about my hearing problem." However, arriving at the actionable moment involves many unique variables driven by the observations, feelings and insights of the hearing impaired individual.

Three Properties of Hearing Problems

Engelund noted that people had to become aware of and recognise different properties of hearing problems before seeking assistance. The three properties of hearing problems are: Hearing Related Problems, Manifestation of Problems and Consequences of Problems.

- 1 Hearing Related Problems relate to peripheral hearing loss. Unpredictability (i.e., being unsure of what was said) difficulty with audibility, compromised localisation ability, increasing hearing thresholds and poor speech intelligibility contribute to persistent fallible communication.
- 2 Manifestation of Problems increase as disappointments in social situations and unmet personal needs instigate associated relational and personal tribulations. For example, significant suffering, hardship, sadness, fear, annoyance, shame, embarrassment and distress may manifest as hearing problems increase.
- 3 Consequences of Problems appear as these manifestations accumulate. Consequences may include how the person perceives their professional, social and personal identity, personal body image and how one fits into society as a hearing impaired person.

Four Stages of Hearing Loss Recognition

Engelund documented four stages of hearing loss recognition: Attracting Attention, Becoming Suspicious, Sensing Tribulation and Jeopardising Fundamental Self. Upon conclusion of the four stages, the individual typically arrives at the "time for hearing."

Some people were not denying hearing loss; they were simply not experiencing it

- 1 Attracting Attention occurs when the person draws attention to themselves because communication has broken down. Viewed from the communication partner's perspective, the individual may appear to be in denial. However, denial was not as significant as was the lack of self-experienced hearing problems. Some people were not denying hearing loss; they were simply not experiencing it.
- 2 Becoming Suspicious occurs when individuals notice fallible communication at a more significant level. People in this stage may think their hearing is essentially normal with occasional hearing problems. To a large extent, they continue to take their hearing for granted.
- 3 Sensing Tribulation occurs when people recognise the consequences of hearing problems and have emotional and behavioural reactions. People experience tribulation uniquely, depending on their personality, experience and needs. They recognise that their hearing problems have grown worse as they become aware of increased tribulation and cumulative effects. The stage is often characterised by adaptation. People may vacillate in their recognition of their hearing problems and therefore, tribulation may last for years.
- 4 Jeopardising Fundamental Self occurs after tribulations have intensified, thus threatening or endangering the individual, secondary to hearing problems. Once personal relationships are threatened by hearing problems it becomes increasingly difficult to adapt and indeed, lack of adaptation is one reason why people in this stage want to act quickly. Specifically, they fear they cannot be the person they used to be without professional help. They experience a vast array of emotions and believe that their life is out of control. Jeopardising the Fundamental Self contains the most relational and personal tribulation, and the individual responds to ensure their own safety and piece of mind.

Time For Hearing

As the individual observes and experiences negative consequences related to their condition, the "Time for Hearing" emerges. Once they arrive in this stage, they are receptive to amplification and alternatives for their hearing problem. Receptivity increases because the individual experiences personal and meaningful negative consequences secondary to hearing loss. They then realise that their hearing problem will negatively impact and diminish their quality of life, and that they can no longer adapt without professional assistance.

The Time for Hearing is when the individual visits the professional to seek help, and when they are prepared to take responsibility and find a solution to support their fundamental self. Engelund defined this stage as 'An accumulating interplay between activities of consciousness and unpredictable hearing, fallible communication, tribulation and problematic self-identity occurring over time at four different stages.'

Discussion

As people with hearing loss become aware of their problems they travel from a problem not previously consciously recognised, to a situation which demands attention and action. However, the timing and depth of consciousness is uniquely their own.

Until the hearing problem becomes significant to the individual, successful aural rehabilitation is unlikely. Once the hearing problem becomes significant and the person's desire for a solution grows, they become more willing to seek professional management of their hearing loss through hearing aids and related technologies.

The Time for Hearing is when the individual visits the professional to seek help, and when they are prepared to take responsibility

As professionals involved with hearing impaired patients, we must meet people's needs in accordance with their self-driven timing and with respect to their individual progress through the above noted process. The actionable moment in time is different for each individual and is difficult to define. Nonetheless, recognition of the process means that professional intervention will be welcomed and maximally effective when the patient arrives at the Time for Hearing.

References

Engelund, G. (2006): "Time for hearing" - Recognising Process for the Individual. A Grounded Theory. PhD thesis from the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics Audiopedagogics, University of Copenhagen, and Oticon Research Centre, Eriksholm. ■

