“Understanding the Aging Eye and Ear”

Presented by:
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“Blindness cuts off people from the environment; Deafness cuts them off from other people”
-Helen Keller

Objectives

- Attendees will understand the unique challenges inherent in communicating with older adults.
- Attendees will learn appropriate strategies to enhance comprehension and improve outcomes.
- Attendees will discover ways to reduce your own and your client’s frustration while communicating.
- Attendees will find out how to create an environment in which the client can comfortably acknowledge what is and is not understood.
It is estimated that approximately 21% of older adults have both hearing and vision loss by the time they reach 70 years of age. (Berry, Mascia, & Steinman, 2004; Babryn, Schneck, Haegerstrom-Portnoy, & Lott, 2007)

Normal Aging of the Eye

Aging brings changes to all five senses, with the most noticeable change being vision. Many changes in eyesight are the result of normal aging; others are related to a disease process or injury.

Presbyopia- Age Related Vision Changes

- The lens in your eye becomes less elastic and loses its ability to focus
- First signs include eyestrain, difficulty seeing in dim light, problems focusing on small objects and/or fine print. These symptoms of aging eyes are typically first noticed between the ages of 40-50 when it comes time to purchase reading glasses and a magnifying glass!
- Impairment in the ability to adapt to changes in light, requiring more time for eyes to adjust to changes in lighting.
- Reduced "visual acuity" — the ability to discern detail. Colors appear dim, and glare forms when light shines directly at you (reason night driving becomes more difficult).
- Restricted field of vision & diminished depth perception
- Gradual yellowing of the lens and eye, impacting color perception
- Reduced color recognition and colors are less vivid (red appearing pinkish; blues especially hard to distinguish because the lens absorbs more blue light)
- Reduced contrast sensitivity (harder to discern small patterns of similar colors)
Need for More Light

Because the pupil gets smaller as we age, less light is received. This dramatically impacts the amount of light we need as we age.

Vision Impairment from Disease

Four major eye diseases that occur in Older Adults:
- Cataracts
- Macular degeneration
- Diabetic Retinopathy
- Glaucoma

Visual impairments in Older Adults: Cataracts
- Overall blurry/hazy, but field of vision not impacted
- Increased sensitivity to light and glare
- Can be treated by surgery (lens replacement)
- About half of Americans age 80 and older have cataracts or have had cataract surgery
Visual impairments in Older Adults: Age-related Macular Degeneration

- MD destroys the macula, a cluster of light-sensitive cells in the central part of the retina, the structure at the back of the eye. The macula is responsible for crisp central vision and perception of fine detail.
- Causes loss of vision (partial or complete) in the central part of the visual field
- For most, this disorder cannot be resolved medically or surgically

Visual impairments in Older Adults - Glaucoma

- Chronic elevated fluid
- Pressure in the eye, which can damage the optic nerve — the millions of nerve fibers that carry visual information from your eye to your brain
- Vision impacted mainly in the peripheral visual field
- Can lead to blindness

Visual impairments in Older Adults - Diabetic Retinopathy

- Growth of unstable blood vessels that can bleed and scar the retina, related to advanced or long-term diabetes
- Obscures incoming light
- Causes patchy vision
Hearing Impairment Prevalence

3rd most common chronic health condition in older Americans (Chruikshanks et al., 1998)

- 25%-40% of the population over 65 years old is hearing impaired
- Prevalence increases as age increases
  - > 75 y/o: 40-66% have hearing loss
  - > 85 y/o: > 80% have hearing loss

Presbycusis- Age Related Hearing Loss

- Gradual onset
- Slowly progressive
- Greater hearing loss for higher frequency sounds, bilateral & symmetric
- Results in decreased speech understanding, especially in noisy environments

Effects of Presbycusis

- Elevated thresholds
- Reduces speech understanding in noisy and reverberant environments
- Interferes with the perception of rapid changes in speech
Can’t they just use a hearing aid?

According to MarkeTrak VII data, fewer than half of the 65+ age group who could benefit from hearing aids actually purchase them (Kochkin, 2005), and market research has shown that almost 20% of older adults who actually do purchase hearing aids discontinue their use and relegate them to the dresser drawer. (Kochkin, 2000).

Barriers to Hearing Aid Use:

- Embarrassment
- Cost
- Dexterity/Arthritis
- Background noise amplified

How to Effectively Communicate with Seniors
Know your Audience!

- Client/Responsible Party
- Ask how they would like to be communicated with/how often
- Over-Communicate
- Manage Expectations

Communicating with Clients: Be aware of the client’s health issues

- Consider *before* you engage in communication
- Hearing problems, speech problems, and memory loss
- Chronological age is not always a true indicator of a person’s health

Environment

- Disturbing background noise, many people speaking in the same room, ask to turn the TV off
- Ask if the environment is comfortable for them
- Move to a more peaceful and quiet location
Volume

- Difference between enunciating and talking loudly
- Adapt your voice to the needs of the individual

Use Clear, Precise Questions and Sentences

- Repeat and rephrase your sentences and questions
- Use direct questions
- Limit your sentences and questions to 20 words or less
- Don't use slang or filler words and phrases

Employ Visual Aids

- Especially if the client has a hearing or memory problem
- Show the individual what or who you are talking about
- Instead of "would you like to take your bed to your new home?" ask the question while touching the bed
- Floor plans and pictures: reference for later
Connect when Speaking

- Direct your speech at the individual’s face, not side
- Do not eat your words: move your mouth and pronounce each word
- Sit in front of them: eliminates distractions & builds trust
- Maintain eye contact

Single Topic

- Information overload can confuse clients
- Provide information in an outline form
- Provides a series of steps
- Example: discuss the items they would like to take with them; explain how the items will be moved; explain how you will prepare their new home as close to their old as possible

Use Good Listening Skills

- Good communication depends on good listening
- Miscommunications occur when we haven’t been good listeners
Take it Slow

- Remember to pause between sentences and questions to create an opportunity to understand and digest information and questions.
- When you pause, you show respect and patience.
- A sincere smile shows that you understand.

Humble Confidence

- Exude confidence
- Empower client
- Promote dignity
- This combination demonstrates your value.

Over Communicate

- #1 Reason clients refuse/discontinue services: lack of communication.
- Manage their expectations with effective communication (i.e., it will cost...; it will take this much time to complete the task, etc.).
- Communicate as often as possible!
Resources

For more information on age-related vision and hearing changes:

- American Foundation for the Blind: [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org)
- American Optometric Association: [www.aoa.org](http://www.aoa.org)
- National Institute of Health | Senior Health: [Aging And Your Eyes](http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/eyes.htm)
- Products for vision impairment: [www.sightconnection.com](http://www.sightconnection.com)
- Hearing Loss Association of America: [www.hearingloss.org](http://www.hearingloss.org)
- HealthyHearing.com: [www.healthyhearing.com](http://www.healthyhearing.com)
- Better Hearing Institute: [www.betterhearing.org](http://www.betterhearing.org)
- American Academy of Audiology: [http://www.audiology.org](http://www.audiology.org)
- Lighting Research Center: [http://www.lrc.rpi.edu/index.asp](http://www.lrc.rpi.edu/index.asp)
- Center for Assistive Technology and Environmental Access: [http://www.catea.gatech.edu/](http://www.catea.gatech.edu/)

References

Lifeline Academy’s “Living By Design:
Living Spaces for Today’s Seniors. Designing for the Aging Eye and Ear.”

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As Chief Executive Officer of Innovate Today, Liz Barlowe brings more than 25 years of experience in the aging and disability field. For the past ten years she was Chief Operating Officer for Aging Wisely, LLC, a professional care management and consultation company serving the greater Tampa Bay area of Florida. She was the founding administrator and is a shareholder of EasyLiving, a private duty homecare company.

Liz has recently received the Fellow designation from the National Association of Geriatric Care Managers. She is the immediate past president of the Association’s Florida Chapter and is a current Board member. In addition to her professional roles, Liz is also a popular speaker at national industry-related conferences.