



## Between Friends

Thoughts on Caregiving

Suzanne Szczepanski-White, MA

# Are You Listening?

Hey! Listen up! March is International Listening Awareness Month. You don't need to be hard of hearing or deaf to not hear what people are saying.

Young children are often the best listeners, believe it or not, because they are able to really focus and pay attention to what they are hearing. We adults, on the other hand, tend to be too easily distracted. Because we aren't very good listeners, we have problems remembering what we hear. We can also get people angry when they feel we aren't listening, or aren't understanding what they are trying to say.

Too often, instead of really listening to someone, we are thinking about what we want to say next. Or we are multi-tasking – cooking, doing the dishes, watching TV, reading the newspaper, or doing something else while we are only half-listening. Or we are thinking about all of the other things we need to be doing.

Yet we get offended when we feel that someone isn't really listening to us or isn't understanding what we are trying to say, don't we?

Listening to and trying to understand people with dementia or hearing problems can also be a challenge, particularly when the person doesn't seem to hear us, or has difficulty finding the right words to say. Between their aphasia, hearing problems, and our lack of real listening skills, it is amazing that we are ever able to understand each other at all!

So how can we be better listeners? Here are a few tips:

1) Make sure you have a person's attention – and eye contact – before you start trying to have a conversation. Better yet, make sure that they have your attention!

- 2) Avoid distractions. Easier said than done, I know, but particularly important for communicating with those with memory problems or hearing loss. Noisy environments (including background music, restaurant noise, conversations of other people, etc.) can make listening difficult, if not impossible.
- 3) Avoid doing all of those “mental errands” we tend to do instead of paying attention to the person speaking.
- 4) Don't interrupt! Let the person talk.
- 5) Wait until the person stops talking before you respond.
- 6) If a person has hearing problems, speak a little louder than normal when it's your turn to speak, but don't shout! Shouting can be misunderstood by people with hearing loss – or memory problems – as anger, and can distort your message. After all, who wants to listen to a cranky person yelling at you?
- 7) If a person doesn't seem to be understanding you, try re-phrasing your statement rather than repeating the misunderstood words. Use gestures.
- 8) If a person is having problems finding the right words to say, don't “assume” you know what he or she is trying to say. Ask questions. Better yet, respond to the person's feelings.
- 9) Avoid criticizing, or telling a person not to feel the way he or she does.
- 10) When all else fails, take a break, and try again. Or just sit there and be together. Sometimes, silence can speak volumes – when we really listen.

### A Friend's House Adult Day Services

A program of Catholic Services of Macomb  
15945 Canal, Clinton Twp., MI 48038 (586) 412-8494  
26238 Ryan Road, Warren, MI 48091 (586) 759-8700