

## “What Did You Say?”

A lot of people these days may find themselves having a harder time talking with each other.

Our ability to communicate has certainly suffered with the need to wear face masks in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Until the pandemic is over it looks like face masks and coverings are here to stay.

Although we hear with our ears, we use facial expressions and lip reading to understand what is being said. These important visual cues are now obstructed with face masks which makes communication more difficult and sometimes frustrating. Furthermore, personal protective equipment such as face masks and face shields block sound. These barriers can bring the volume down to a level as if you are wearing ear plugs. When you add this handicap to the missing visual cues, it is no wonder we are straining to hear and understand each other.

The overall impact is even more significant for people that are hard of hearing. Remember, we hear with our ears and listen with our brain. Vibrating sound waves reach your ear and then are turned into nerve impulses traveling to the nerves in your brain where they are converted into meaningful words and understandable speech. Effective communication between individuals can be enhanced by hearing aids or amplification devices like a pocket talker or smart phone apps that use a microphone.

So, what can you do to enhance your ability to hear and understand? Facing the speaker may decrease background noise and is helpful even though your mouth is covered, there are still other visual cues that aid in communication. Reduce competing background noise by moving to a quieter space, and turn off unnecessary noise like the television, fan, or radio. If you do not understand what someone is saying, ask them for clarification.

How can I effectively communicate with someone who is having difficulty understanding or communicating? One method is to catch the person's attention before you start speaking, you can do this by saying their name which will allow the listener to direct their attention to the speaker. One can also talk a little slower, slightly louder, or use brief pauses but do not exaggerate your speech or shout. Speak with one another from the same room when possible. If communicating specific things such as a phone number or address, have the listener repeat it back to you so you can correct any inaccuracies. If the listener is asking you to repeat what you have said, consider rephrasing it so that they may better understand what you are saying. It is also good practice to stay topic focused, begin conversation by stating the topic and do not quickly or randomly change topics.

Finally, if you feel the need to remove your mask to communicate, be sure to allow for as much space as possible between you and the other person and, if possible, move your conversation outdoors.

Having the ability to speak and to understand is as important as ever. Be patient and above all, be considerate of others and kind to yourself.

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