



Cochlear[®]
Hear now. And always



Cochlear Family

Communication Strategies for Seniors



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“

The day after switch-on, I felt indescribable joy to be given the gift of sound. As a new cochlear implant recipient, I wanted to experience being able to participate in conversations.

Dianne, Cochlear™ Nucleus® System recipient.

”



Introduction

Communication is how we develop and maintain relationships, and how we interact with the world. It keeps us connected to the people we love, and it helps us express who we are.

As a senior, your ability to communicate effectively can help you maintain meaningful connections with your loved ones. By focusing on, and understanding your communication style, you can improve your listening skills, self-advocacy, and self-confidence, which are all pivotal to your ability to build strong, healthy relationships with those around you.

Research shows that regular hearing and listening practice is an important part of your hearing progress and success.^{1,2} And having access to information, tools and activities that are easy to use and shaped to your individual needs will help to improve your communication skills.

We've put together this guide to help build your conversational confidence so you can communicate more effectively with family, friends, and others in your community. For a more tailored rehabilitation plan, we also recommend speaking with your hearing healthcare professional or clinical team.

Practical advice to help you communicate better

Factors that influence communication

There are many different factors that can influence your understanding during a conversation. These factors tend to fall into three main categories: Speaker, Environment and Listener. We've put together a table with some common factors that can influence your understanding in each of these categories, along with some examples of things that can impair your ability to understand what is being said.

Exercise 1

Go through the table and consider each of the factors that fall under the three different categories. Next, reflect on each of the factors and determine what is and what isn't within the control of the conversation participants. For example, start with the Speaker category:

- Accent:**
 This is a factor that is not within the control of the participant. So, put an "X" in the box.
- Looking Away:**
 This is a factor that is within the control of the participant. So, put a "✓" in the box.
- Speaking too loudly or softly:**
 This is a factor that may be within the control of the participant. So, put a "✓" in the box.

We will ask you to revisit this checklist in Exercise 3, so remember to keep a copy once you have completed it.

SPEAKER	ENVIRONMENT	LISTENER
<input type="checkbox"/> Accent	<input type="checkbox"/> Visual distractions	<input type="checkbox"/> Interested in topic
<input type="checkbox"/> Direction of gaze – is the person looking away	<input type="checkbox"/> Auditory distractions – background music, traffic noises, talking	<input type="checkbox"/> Emotional state – feeling tired, frustrated, ill
<input type="checkbox"/> Visibility of face – is the speaker's mouth visible	<input type="checkbox"/> Room acoustics – echoes, fluttering curtains, noisy floor-boards etc.	<input type="checkbox"/> Speech processor positioning
<input type="checkbox"/> Speaking rate – is the speaker talking too slowly or too quickly	<input type="checkbox"/> Distance between the speaker and listener	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication style
<input type="checkbox"/> Volume – is the speaker talking too loudly or too softly	<input type="checkbox"/> Visibility of the speaker – can you clearly see their face	<input type="checkbox"/> Assertiveness
<input type="checkbox"/> Facial expression – does the speaker have a beard or a moustache or exaggerate their lip movements	<input type="checkbox"/> Availability of assistive listening devices – Bluetooth® or wireless accessories	<input type="checkbox"/> Motivation to hear
<input type="checkbox"/> Eating or drinking	<input type="checkbox"/> Lighting – too dim or too bright	<input type="checkbox"/> Lip reading ability

The material shared above is based upon two HOPE Online seminars presented by Clinical Audiologist and Researcher Susan Bizner M.A. CCC-A[2].



Understanding your communication style

Communication is important for everything you do in life. For example, as a cochlear implant recipient, you will have ongoing appointments with your hearing healthcare professional. Communicating any issues or concerns effectively will be important to achieving your optimal hearing performance. Similarly, your ability to communicate your feelings to loved ones will be beneficial to your hearing journey, providing you with both the emotional and practical support you need to thrive, as well as opportunities for friendship, intellectual stimulation, laughter, and fun.

Understanding why people communicate in a certain way can help you improve your communication skills. It can help you to:

- Complete everyday tasks more easily, such as making medical appointments
- Communicate more effectively with family and friends, so you feel connected and included
- Enjoy an increased sense of independence and achievement

“

One needs to have patience because it can take a while to hear speech clearly. The learning curve is different for everyone. The more you work at it, the more successful you will be.

”

Cathy, Cochlear™ Nucleus® System recipient.

We've highlighted three common communication styles to help you get started: Observer, Leader and Diplomat.



The Observer

People typically adopt this communication style in situations where they perceive it's better to take a step back. For example, you may choose to adopt an observer style if you have concerns about your ability to communicate effectively or you're worried you may mishear and respond inappropriately. Adopting an observer style is not always a bad thing. In some situations, stepping back and taking the time to listen can be very positive for your relationships, helping you to listen to others and build trust, understanding and connection. However, there will be times when using a leader or diplomat communication style may enable you to take advantage of opportunities that might benefit you socially, emotionally, or practically.



The Leader

This communication style assumes the role of the primary communicator and tends to adopt a more directive approach to help guide conversation. You might use this approach in situations where you have concerns about mishearing or providing an inappropriate response. For example, you might say, "I've just received a cochlear implant. Would you mind talking more slowly?" Or you might say to your hearing healthcare professional, "I am struggling to hear when there is background noise. Can you help me with this?" A positive aspect to this communication style, can give you the opportunity to express your feelings and advocate for your needs.



The Diplomat

This communication style is well received by most conversational partners and can often result in positive outcomes for both parties. A diplomatic approach to conversations encourages equal participation between conversational partners and may make it easier for you to express your feelings and advocate for your hearing needs and ensure the other person has understood how they can help you achieve your best hearing.



Don't hesitate to ask for the person to repeat themselves or to move to a quieter location if you cannot hear them clearly.

Alana, Cochlear™ Nucleus® System recipient.



Exercise 2: What's your communication style?

The aim of this exercise is to help you think about which communication style is the most effective according to the person you are speaking with or the situation you are in.

Step 1 – Reflecting on the three different communication styles – Observer, Leader, Diplomat – think about how you interact with others during conversations. Which category best describes your communication style?

Step 2 – Is your communication style the same with every person you talk to? Do you adapt your style according to your relationship with the person you are speaking with? For example, think about how differently you communicate with your grandchild compared to a stranger in the supermarket. Look at the table below and try to think about how your communication style changes depending on who you are talking to by placing a '✓' in the appropriate box.

	Partner/Friend	Grandchild	Doctor/Clinical Team	Stranger
Observer				
Leader				
Diplomat				

Step 3 - For this last step, think about how you might benefit from developing the skills to confidently communicate your hearing needs. To help you get started, we've listed some reasons below:

- Communicating clearly and with confidence can help you make a positive impression on others, which is important in establishing and maintaining strong relationships.
- People are willing to help you hear better if you can help them understand what you need from them.
- Being able to communicate appropriately with different people in your life – whether it's a family member, your hearing healthcare professional or people in your community – will help you get the best out conversations with others.



6 steps to help improve your communication

Your cochlear implant can help improve the clarity of what you hear³⁻⁵ but having a range of communication tactics in place can help to improve the way in which you connect with others. Communication is a learned skill, so we've put together six simple tactics for you to practise when having conversations in your daily life. They can also help the people around you to better understand how to communicate with you and other people with hearing loss.

How do you see yourself?

1 How do you refer to your hearing loss? Perhaps you tell people that you are 'hearing impaired', 'hard-of-hearing' or 'deaf'. Whatever term you use to identify your hearing loss, it's important to talk to people about it and let them know how they can help you. Most people will be happy to oblige if they understand what they can do to meet your hearing needs.

Some tactics may include asking people to:

- Speak normally – they do not need to shout, but they may need to repeat certain words if you mishear them or are unsure about the sound
- Speak face-to-face because visual cues help a lot and being able to see their mouth means you can also lip read to assist your understanding.

How do you talk about your cochlear implant?

2 You may encounter situations when you are asked about your sound processor, or people may be curious about your hearing loss and how it impacts your daily life. Remember, people aren't always familiar with a cochlear implant, and they may not understand how it works. Try to develop a simple explanation about your device and how it helps you hear. If you've prepared something in advance, you may find it easier to talk about your cochlear implant without feeling self-conscious.

- For example, you might say, "I have severe hearing loss. I am not able to hear well with hearing aids, so I have a cochlear implant to help improve my hearing."

How can you manage different listening environments?

3 Think about the places where you experience your best hearing. Then make a list of the places where you find it particularly challenging to hear. Where would you normally sit in this environment?

- For example, if you struggle to hear clearly in your local café, you might say, “I am having trouble hearing at this table. Would you mind if we move to a quieter table at the back?”
- At a family gathering you might say, “Would you mind if I sit at the head of the table so I can clearly see your faces when you are talking to me?”

With a little forward thinking, you can ‘stage manage’ social gatherings around your hearing needs so you can focus on what truly matters – connecting with loved ones.

What do you normally do if you can’t follow a conversation?

4 Think about what you normally do or say when you are struggling to hear a conversation. Perhaps you say, “Pardon?” or “What was that?” This is not a very specific request so the speaker may not understand what you didn’t hear or what they need to repeat. Being aware of how you normally react in different situations enables you to think about how you can better communicate your hearing needs to others.

What are better ways to communicate your hearing needs?

5 When you are struggling to hear a conversation, using a specific request may help the speaker to better understand how they can help you. You could try putting some of the following into practice:

- “Could you please lower your hand so that I can read your lips?”
- “Could we move into the light so that I can see your face?”
- “Would you mind saying the same thing in a different way?”

Practise using these strategies with your friends, family, or caregiver so that you gain the confidence to use them in different situations. Keep track of what works best for you so that you can use them in the future.

How can you build on your self-advocacy skills?

6 Once you have practised using specific requests to help you hear better, think about how you can build on this skill. By using the following strategies, you can improve the way you communicate with others so that you can achieve your hearing goals. Here are some tactics you can use, to help you:

- Use ‘I’ statements – using ‘I’ can help you communicate your concerns, feelings, and needs without sounding critical of others, helping you to get your point across without causing the speaker to shut down
- Make a specific request – this will enable the speaker to understand exactly what you need from them
- Explain why you are making the request – people with normal hearing may not understand how they can modify their communication to help you hear
- Be courteous – this will motivate the speaker to help you
- Express your gratitude – making the speaker feel appreciated may inspire them to be more helpful towards people with hearing loss in the future

Here are two examples of clear communication to help you communicate your hearing needs to others:

Example 1

Instead of “Can you speak up, it’s too noisy in here” try “While my cochlear implant helps me to hear more clearly, I still struggle when there’s background noise. Would you mind if sit at a quieter table?”

Example 2

Instead of “Can you move your hand away from your face” try “Excuse me David, would you mind lowering your hand? Thank you, that makes it easier for me to lipread and follow what you are saying.”



Getting the best out of your conversations

Communicating in a calm, thoughtful way can help to foster understanding. However, even with a genuine, caring attitude, learning how to communicate with a cochlear implant can be challenging and it will take time and practice to achieve your goals. There will be times when you might find conversations unclear. Learning and implementing a few simple communication tactics can help to increase your confidence when you are talking and listening to others. This may help you to build and maintain strong relationships with friends and family.

“

Look at people's eyes. Try to grab their attention by making small movements with your hands: this can help grab people's attention and they will look at you.

”

Fernando, Cochlear™ Nucleus® System recipient.

Practising clear speech

1 Speaking clearly and concisely simply means using the right words at the right time. Clear speaking comes from making a concerted effort to:

- Express every word, sentence, and idea in a very precise way
- Speaking slowly and clearly
- Taking pauses between phrases and thoughts.

One way you can reinforce clear speech is by using ‘I’ messages. If you begin a sentence by saying “I think” or “I feel” you are telling the listener that what you are saying is based on your personal experience. This can help you get your point across in a non-confrontational way, and it can help to defuse any misunderstandings. After sharing your thoughts and feelings about something, always encourage two-way communication by asking the other person to express what they think and feel about an issue.

Using clear speech can improve hearing and understanding up to 20%.⁶

Thinking ahead

2 One tactic that can be effective when you are learning to communicate with your cochlear implant, is to prepare for conversations in advance. This can involve:

- Thinking about potential topics of conversation
- Brainstorming possible responses to common conversational starters
- Making a list of words and phrases and saying them out loud
- Role-playing conversations with a family member or caregiver

By thinking ahead and taking the time to plan what you might say, you can reduce some of the anxiety associated with communicating with different people. With practice and patience, you will gain confidence to enjoy conversations.



What to do when things go wrong

3 Conversations don't always go to plan, particularly when you are learning to hear with your cochlear implant. There are times when you might mishear or struggle to follow a conversation. The following strategies can help you get a conversation back on track:



Changing environments – Sometimes bad lighting, background noise or poor acoustics can make it very challenging to hear. Try saying, "I'd love to hear what you have to say, but the background noise is making it difficult. Would you mind if we moved to the corner of the room?"



Facing each other
Don't be afraid to remind conversational partners to face you when communicating. This will allow you to see important visual cues. Try saying, "I lipread best when I can see your face straight on. Would you mind facing me when you speak. Thank you".



Speaking at a normal level
If someone speaks too loudly, speech can become distorted. If you explain this to the person you are talking to, it gives them an opportunity to adjust their volume. Try saying, "I really appreciate you trying to help me hear but because of my cochlear implant, it really helps me if you can speak at your normal volume."



Repeating something slowly
If you ask someone to repeat what they've just said, they may say it the same way as they did previously or they may increase their volume or exaggerate their lip movements, neither of which will help your understanding. Try saying:

- Would you mind repeating that for me again but at a slower pace?
- Would you mind going over that one more time, but saying it more slowly?



Choosing a different phrase
This is an effective, but underused, strategy. Often, when you ask someone if they could rephrase what they've said, they automatically choose words that are easier to hear. Try saying:

- "I didn't follow what you said just then. Could you please say that in a different way?"
- "I don't think I quite understand what you meant. Would you mind repeating it using different words?"



Understanding the context

It's always easier for you to follow a conversation if you are familiar with the topic. For example, if you know your friend is talking about a television show she has watched, it's easier for you to predict the sort of language and vocabulary she might be using. Try saying:

- "I am having trouble understanding this conversation. Could you please tell me what topic you are discussing?"
- "Sorry to interrupt but I didn't catch all of that. Could you please clarify what you are talking about?"



Reflecting back

A great way to make sure you are following a conversation correctly is to check with the speaker that you've understood everything they've said. Reflecting back means repeating in your own words what you think has been said to you. By emphasising that you are repeating their ideas to check your understanding, you are showing the person that you are genuinely interested in what they have to say. Try saying:

- "Can I check if I understood that correctly."
- "I'd just like to confirm that I got that right."
- "If I understand you correctly, you are saying..."



Saying thank you and showing you understood

Whenever a person you are talking to has repeated what they've said or provided additional information to help you understand, always say thank you. This allows you both to move on to other topics and it also helps establish a strong sense of connection and understanding. Try saying:

- "Thank you for repeating that. It makes more sense to me now."
- "Thanks for letting me repeat that back to you. I know what you are saying now."
- "Thanks for saying that sentence in a different way. It really helped me to understand."

How to apply communication strategies

Now that you have a better understanding of the key steps to improve communication and the different strategies that you can adopt to enjoy conversations more, it's time to revisit the table in the first exercise.

Exercise 3:

In Exercise 1, we asked you to go through the table, reflect on each of the factors and determine what is and what isn't within the control of the conversation participants. For this last exercise, look at the table again and consider if you want to:

- Change where the “X” or “✓” has been placed.
- Where you have put a “✓”, think about different strategies you could use to address these issues and practise using the correct phrasing.



Recipients can build their confidence practising their conversation skills in a group of other recipients and friends.

Sue, Cochlear™ Nucleus® System recipient.



SPEAKER	ENVIRONMENT	LISTENER
<input type="checkbox"/> Accent	<input type="checkbox"/> Visual distractions	<input type="checkbox"/> Interested in topic
<input type="checkbox"/> Direction of gaze – is the person looking away	<input type="checkbox"/> Auditory distractions – background music, traffic noises, talking	<input type="checkbox"/> Emotional state – feeling tired, frustrated, ill
<input type="checkbox"/> Visibility of face – is the speaker's mouth visible	<input type="checkbox"/> Room acoustics – echoes, fluttering curtains, noisy floor-boards etc.	<input type="checkbox"/> Speech processor positioning
<input type="checkbox"/> Speaking rate – is the speaker talking too slowly or too quickly	<input type="checkbox"/> Distance between the speaker and listener	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication style
<input type="checkbox"/> Volume – is the speaker talking too loudly or too softly	<input type="checkbox"/> Visibility of the speaker – can you clearly see their face	<input type="checkbox"/> Assertiveness
<input type="checkbox"/> Facial expression – does the speaker have a beard or a moustache or exaggerate their lip movements	<input type="checkbox"/> Availability of assistive listening devices – Bluetooth or wireless accessories	<input type="checkbox"/> Motivation to hear
<input type="checkbox"/> Eating or drinking	<input type="checkbox"/> Lighting – too dim or too bright	<input type="checkbox"/> Lip reading ability

The material shared above is based upon two HOPE Online seminars presented by Clinical Audiologist and Researcher Susan Bizner M.A. CCC-A[2].

Hear now. And always

As the global leader in implantable hearing solutions, Cochlear is dedicated to helping people with moderate to profound hearing loss experience a life full of hearing. We have provided more than 700,000 implantable devices, helping people of all ages to hear and connect with life's opportunities.

We aim to give people the best lifelong hearing experience and access to innovative future technologies. We have the industry's best clinical, research and support networks.

That's why more people choose Cochlear than any other hearing implant company.

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■ Cochlear Ltd (ABN 96 002 618 073) 1 University Avenue, Macquarie University, NSW 2109, Australia Tel: +61 2 9428 6555 Fax: +61 2 9428 6352

www.cochlear.com

Please seek advice from your health professional about treatments for hearing loss. Outcomes may vary, and your health professional will advise you about the factors which could affect your outcome. Always follow the directions for use. Not all products are available in all countries. Please contact your local Cochlear representative for product information.

Views expressed are those of the individual. Consult your health professional to determine if you are a candidate for Cochlear Technology.

Cochlear™ Nucleus® implant systems are intended for the treatment of moderately severe to profound hearing loss.

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