

Say What?

By Helen Hinchliff

10th in Series

“Your radio is way too loud, Joanne. Your neighbour is complaining again,” the night time caregiver said for what could well have been the 100th time. She started to turn it down.

“Wait,” my mother pleaded, “Let’s do the bathroom test first.”

My mother had done this test 99 times already, so she was certain of her reasoning. It went like this: The distance from her radio to her bathroom was the same as to her neighbour’s room; when she was in her bathroom she couldn’t hear her radio. “Therefore,” she concluded, certain her reasoning would prevail, “If I can’t hear my radio in my bathroom, then my neighbor can’t hear it in her room.”

There was just one problem with her logic: My mother was deaf and her neighbor wasn’t.

Hearing loss is common among older people. According to the National Institute of Health (NIH), one-third of all Americans between the ages of 65 and 74 experience hearing loss. After age 75, that figure rises to about one-half. Statistics Canada reports that one million Canadian adults admit to hearing loss, but estimates the true figure might be three million, because many people don’t realize they have a problem.

My mother’s hearing loss became noticeable when she was in her early 70s, but when I suggested a hearing test, she

bristled. “I’m not deaf,” she declared and I think she truly believed it. She was living alone and could turn up her TV. She told us to speak up and stop mumbling.

By the time she was in her late eighties, her hearing loss was so acute she was turning up the TV or radio to maximum volume and in conversation we had to sit directly in front of her and shout.

Hearing loss can be caused by years of exposure to loud noise and can also result from viral or bacterial infections, heart conditions or stroke, head injuries, tumors, and certain medicines. But for most seniors, it’s a condition called *presbycusis* (prez-buh-KYOO-sis).

If that sounds like Greek, you’re right! It means hearing loss among the elderly and it tends to run in families. My maternal grandfather was so deaf we had to shout at him too.

Hearing loss shouldn’t be ignored. The NIH warns that if we can’t hear properly, we may find it difficult “to understand and follow a doctor’s advice, respond to warnings, or hear doorbells and alarms.” The Canadian Hearing Society warns that older adults with untreated hearing loss may experience social isolation, risk depression, increase their chances of significant cognitive decline, and run a greater risk of falling.

Last spring I realized I’m beginning to strain to hear soft spoken people, particularly if they are on my right. I found that annoying, but my apparent hearing loss got scary when some guy on a bike whizzed closely past me on my right and I hadn’t heard him coming.

The perfect candidate for a free hearing test offered by *Next Gen Hearing*, I was prepared to learn that I had slight deafness in my right ear, but was surprised to discover hearing loss in both ears—enough to suggest that hearing aids might be helpful.

I'm not technically savvy, so I thought I'd better learn how to wear them sooner rather than later. Several friends urged me to go to Costco. "It's cheaper," they said. "And you can do your shopping while you're at it."

That may be a plan for some, but hearing aids require several appointments for fittings, adjustments, and follow-up. I don't have time for all those trips to Victoria or Nanaimo. Besides, I like to do my shopping on island to support our economy and I think we're lucky to have two audiology clinics right here. *Next Gen Hearing* has an office at King's Lane, and *Connect Hearing* has one on Lower Ganges Road, down the hill from Pioneer Village.

I wore my new hearing aids on trial for a month and, except for the people I told, nobody seemed to notice them. I could hear my soft spoken friends with ease, but there were times when my boisterous friends were so noisy I had to turn my aids down to the absolute minimum.

In June my mother needed round-the-clock caregiving. I knew there'd be considerable shouting involved and even more stress, so I decided to give up on hearing aids for the time being. But you can bet I won't wait until you have to shout at me before I try wearing them again.

Say! How's *your* hearing these days? Depending on your age, there could be a 50-50 chance you'd be better off with hearing aids. Why not give them a try?

