

# AUDIOLOGY

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stand to lose as much as 20 percent of their income, according to studies. "They are perceived as not being intelligent," explains Breakstone. "They don't answer questions correctly because they don't hear the question," he says. "They're also perceived as being non-responsive to problems," he adds. "They won't help themselves, so why will they help the company?" A degradation of today's income consequently leads to less retirement income and investment savings.

"The hearing loss of workers impairs their ability to fully engage in meetings and conversations, giving co-workers and bosses the impression they are less equipped to handle their jobs," explained Carsten Trads, President of Clarity, a leading supplier of amplified telephones and other assistive listening devices. "However, access to technology solutions such as amplified telephones and other assistive listening devices can dramatically improve these employees' productivity and ultimately their success at the workplace."

The Better Hearing Institute is a not-for-profit organization with the mission of educating the public and medical profession on hearing loss, its treatment and prevention. Its study, called "Impact of Hearing Loss on Household Income," found that household income is reduced, on average, by nearly \$23,000 per year, due to untreated hearing-loss, depending on the degree of loss.

## Help wanted

Aging baby boomers are the fastest-growing segment of those with increasing loss, for obvious reasons. The advent of rock and roll (and advancements in electronics with which to enjoy it) have been a real boon to an industry which today has an overwhelming

demand for trained specialists. Last year, in US News and World Report, hearing health care sciences was rated the #1 business to go into; there are simply not enough people in the field to meet the demand. And that's with only 10 percent of sufferers addressing their hearing loss problem.



Breakstone

Audiology is the study of hearing disorders, and includes evaluation of hearing function and rehabilitation of patients with hearing impairments. ENT physicians (ear, nose and throat) are necessary to diagnose serious disorders and ailments, such as infections and punctured ear drums. Audiologists have masters or doctorates in audiology, and their training is much more generalized; they can address issues of balance and other disorders caused by ear problems, as well as talk about hearing aids. And then there are Hearing Instrument Specialists, whose training is solely in hearing aids. They refer to doctors and audiologists for anything else, and spend their days testing for and when necessary, recommending and fitting hearing aids.

As plastic surgery has become "cosmetic surgery" it shouldn't be long before the term "hearing aids" is replaced by something with less of an age-related stigma, another reason so many who need them resist getting help. The product has changed so much that even the hearing aids of two or three years ago are outdated.

"New hearing aids are targeting the baby boomers who are more conscientious about how they look," says Breakstone. Within the last two years, the devices have become more powerful and much more discreet. "They come in different colors and shapes," he says. "Some people are actually addressing them as a fashion statement now." Breakstone relates the story of a woman who purchased one bright green device and another

in hot pink; she uses them as ice-breakers at cocktail parties and in doing so, has totally removed the stigma of wearing them.

## New style, new feel

It's new technology and resulting scale which excites Breakstone and his colleagues, however. "We can help people," he says, "and now hearing aids are comfortable and natural sounding. They're not the hearing aids your grandmother wore."

Breakstone explains that approximately two years ago, nanotechnology changed the way sound is being carried. Hearing aids are now actually small computers that are sitting on top of your ears. "The new style is called open-fit hearing aids," he says. "A little micro-processor is worn on top of the ear, with a little wire that goes down by the temple and into the ear. The wire has a little tiny silicone tip on it. 85 percent of what we fit are these. The wire is clear, so you don't see it. If you're a woman, no one will ever know you're wearing it." But for men, women with short hair, and fashionistas who like to show off, they're available in dozens of colors, metallics, polka-dots, and even a few textures, such as the mini-golf-ball, which is, naturally, white with dimples.

"Now because they're so small and comfortable there's very little contact in the ear," says Breakstone. "In my own practice (which comprises 5 southwest Florida offices), we've seen a patient-level satisfaction go from about 83 percent to a 98 percent rate in three years time," he says, of the open-fit style. Due to their shape, they'll stay on the ear during most normal activity, the exception being something extremely physical, such as football or rugby.

The testing for these new hearing aids is also different than that of days past; it's all done on computer. "And up comes a 'loss prescription' that's fed directly into the hearing aid," explains Breakstone. So each hearing aid is pre-customized before the customer wears it for the first time.

## Try before you buy

Another new twist to the industry is that people can actually check out a pair of hearing aids like they would a library book. Customers are given 2 weeks with a pair of aids before they even consider purchasing them, allowing for an adjustment period. The often-heard horror story of dozens of fittings are also a thing of the past. "We generally will see people two to three times after a fitting, and they're happy," says Breakstone. "There's not a lot of adjustments after that."

The try-before-you-buy scenario is enough to entice many hearing-loss sufferers to finally buy the help they need, particularly when they experience the comfortable, non-invasive nature of today's hearing aids. Breakstone believes that baby boomers are becoming much more educated and are willing to spend money on something that will really help them; they just don't want to waste money.

But the initial resistance to be tested for hearing aids is still very much there, and creates problems in both the workplace and home. Family members, friends and co-workers struggle not only to accept that someone is willing to miss out on so much of what's happening around them, but also to fix a communication problem that is so frustrating and/or demeaning to those in constant proximity.

## Re-charged, remote and wireless

Today's hearing aids are also rechargeable. They still run on batteries, but can now be plugged into a little container and charged overnight. Many also come with remote controls so they can be adjusted to changing environments. A wearer may want to increase the amount of noise reduction in a busy restaurant or noisy movie, for example.

"Hearing aids are wireless," says Breakstone, "and they're also eventually attach to your cell phone." ■

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