

# Sound Advice

Rebecca Millington meets hearing specialist Curtis Alcock of Exeter based Broom Reid Harris who is actively raising awareness of the importance of hearing and modernising attitudes to both ongoing care and treatment.

## Hearing v. Sight

The average person communicates over 16,000 words a day, just imagine the number you hear! This never ending flow of information through our ears affects some of the most important areas of life such as relationships, effectiveness at work and keeping our minds sharp. No wonder American author, political activist and lecturer Helen Keller who was both blind and deaf wrote, "To be cut off from hearing is to



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be isolated indeed". She was in the unique position of being able to compare the differences of being without sight and hearing, concluding "After a lifetime in silence and darkness, that to be deaf is a greater affliction than to be blind."

We've all experienced temporary blindness; we simply need to close our eyes, but few can truly feel the reality of having reduced hearing and how it impacts on quality of life. So we often take our hearing for granted! But many aspects rely on good hearing including safety and awareness; how we communicate with people and enjoying simple day to day pleasures such as listening to music. Watch a movie without the sound and you remove the emotion; the suspense of a horror film evaporates, the 'tear-jerking' scenes of a romance dry up.

## The power of hearing

Apart from bats – humans are more capable than any other mammal at distinguishing pitch. A trained musician can detect a difference in vibration of one millionth of a second. It is so easy to take for granted the complexities of our hearing without realising. "When we close our eyes to go to sleep at night they are resting, however our ears are constantly monitoring the environment for any potential threat allowing us to sleep through a thunderstorm but wake instantly at the creak of a floorboard" says Curtis. "We take our ability to converse so much for granted that we become frustrated when the flow of conversation doesn't just 'happen'; when it doesn't just flow from one mind to another. Hence our unintentional impatience with people who ask us to repeat ourselves or when people can't get their words out."

Imagine yourself in a busy coffee shop talking over others to a person across the table. Your ears selectively push away the background hum of conversation to hear that person better, whilst picking up on the rhythm, intonation and subtleties of what is being said. The English

language is extremely complex and we use our ears to decipher it to make communication successful. Think of the number of e-mails and text messages that are misread without the help of our ears. "Should we find ourselves in a foreign country where our grasp of the native language is minimal or non-existent, we feel robbed of our intelligence and our sense of humour. We begin to realise just how much of whom we are as individuals is grounded in our ability to interact in a shared language" says Curtis.

## Caring for your hearing

In the past people used to see hearing aids as a symbol of 'being deaf' but now that hearing technology has become more discreet and effective, they are increasingly used by people who refuse to miss out on everything their hearing can give them. "Like wearing a pair of glasses, hearing technology is a way of correcting or enhancing what we already have. If you are having trouble with your sight then a trip to the opticians is a logical step, but if you don't hear something, how do you know there was something there to hear? You could be missing all sorts of important things and be none the wiser. You don't know how good your hearing really is unless you are having regular check-ups."

Curtis explains how hearing care has only had the last 100 years to evolve in comparison to eye care which has been around since the 13th century! "But evolve it has. As a family run, independent hearing practice we have the freedom to tailor our service to your exact needs to make sure you are getting the best out of your hearing. The technology is becoming less and less noticeable, which is a huge step forward, but 'out of sight, out of mind' also means it's unfortunately harder for some people to forget their old fashioned attitudes towards hearing problems."

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