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Caregiver Thought Leader Interview: Diane Nens • July 22, 2015

EDITOR'S PEN

Gary Barg, Editor-in-Chief

Caregiver Thought Leader Interview: Diane Nens

Gary Barg: As an audiologist, what are the challenges that you see when caregivers walk into your office with loved ones living with hearing loss?

Diane Nens: We see denial as the number one barrier. The loved ones just have not accepted the fact that they have hearing loss. This is very difficult and challenging for everyone involved, since hearing loss has such an impact on people's lives. I do not think that the issue has gotten the recognition that it truly deserves. Currently, there are 48 million Americans that have hearing loss in at least one ear. Additionally, it is the third most common chronic condition among older adults after arthritis and high blood pressure. Another challenge is cost. Generally, hearing aids can cost thousands of dollars, and many seniors do not have disposable income. It's important to note though, that recently, we've seen a trend with hearing aid companies bringing down the cost of hearing aids to make them more affordable.

Gary Barg: Why do you think seniors, in particular, avoid talking to their loved ones about their hearing loss?

Diane Nens: What we have found is that they fear losing their independence. It is just one more disability, impairment, or medical issue on top of possibly a myriad of problems. Another reason they avoid talking about their hearing loss is of course, denial. Many people feel if they admit to having hearing loss, they might need hearing aids, and they fear that will make them look old. In fact, when one has hearing loss and answers questions incorrectly or asks someone

to repeat themselves, it actually makes the hearing loss more obvious than just wearing a hearing aid.

Gary Barg: So, wearing a hearing aid can actually make it harder for people to know you have hearing loss.

Diane Nens: Exactly. They feel more connected with their relationships. When a person has hearing loss and is going through the struggle of not hearing conversations, they start to withdraw from those situations. They feel isolated, which many times results in depression.

Gary Barg: What are some of the signs of hearing loss we should, as caregivers, pay attention to?

Diane Nens: If their loved one is asking them to repeat more often. That is an obvious sign. Many times, speech of others is not clear to them and may sound like the people are mumbling. The volume on the television or the radio may be turned up. They may have trouble hearing on the phone, or even avoid talking on the phone. They can also have difficulty hearing in groups. You may see an individual looking for facial expressions and lip reading.

Gary Barg: Isolation is a killer and hearing loss enhances people's isolation, because they do not want to be in uncomfortable situations.

Diane Nens: Exactly. When people with hearing loss wear hearing aids, they actually report significant improvements with relationships. Their self-esteem, overall quality of life, and mental health improve and in turn they can be more engaged again.

Gary Barg: As a leading audiologist, can you share some tips for caregivers to provide quality care for senior living with hearing loss.

Diane Nens: If their loved one is in denial or resisting even the topic of hearing aids, the caregiver can start by reminding them that if they are continually asking people to repeat themselves or even avoiding conversations, it is hard to communicate and affecting the relationship. That is where some of the depression can set in. Remind them that there is treatment and reassure them about the ongoing support available. Their loved ones need to know that someone will be there to help them over those rough spots and answer their questions.

What a caregiver can do first is talk to their doctor to schedule a hearing test. If a hearing loss is diagnosed and if hearing aids are recommended, the caregiver

can help their loved ones come to terms with the diagnosis, if they are having difficulty with it. If there is resistance, use what I call the Loving Persistence. Remind them communication is a two way street and it takes both parties to work together. Being the human hearing aid with our loved ones is a lot of work and really doesn't help them. If there is strong resistance, the caregiver can offer to have their hearing tested too. Sometimes that is really comforting and encouraging.

Gary Barg: What is the one most important piece of advice you would like to share with family caregivers?

Diane Nens: First and foremost, the key is recognizing the signs of hearing loss. Then realizing their loved one needs an appointment for a hearing test. Next, be sensitive to the impact that hearing loss can have on an individual and their loved ones. Work with a hearing healthcare professional that you feel very comfortable with and can communicate with easily. Finally, be supportive, patient, and lovingly persistent.

Gary Barg: So where can caregivers go for more information on hearing loss?

Diane Nens: They can visit our website, hihealthinnovations.com, or call our toll free number, (855) 523-9355, to speak with someone for more information, or to schedule a free hearing test. They can also contact the Hearing Loss Association of America, a nationwide organization that has support groups and many good resources available. Their website is hearingloss.org

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