Aging Lifestyles: Did you hear the one about the hearing aid?

by Joe_Volz

Talking to Aunt Jean on the phone is a real trip.

Usually the first thing she says to my wife is, "Kate, what phone are you using? I can't hear you."

No, she can't hear Kate but it has nothing to do with the phone. Aunt Jean is deaf and won't think of buying a hearing aid. "I just have some wax in my ears," she insists. No doctor agrees with that theory.

But Jean's insistence on turning a deaf ears to her problem over the last 20 years, made us determined not to make the same mistake. After all, many experts say, almost everyone 65 and older begins to suffer some loss of hearing. It's a matter of timing and degree, not if.

Kate and I have discovered during this past year that it is time for hearing aids for both of us.

For me, the high tones went first. It was increasingly difficult to hear the soft soprano voices of my young female students in the journalism classes I teach. I had to keep asking students to repeat themselves. And I was annoying Kate by urging her to speak louder. Add to that, I was jacking up the volume on the TV loud enough so that the neighbors in the next town house could hear.

I made the trip to the ear doctor first and bought a hearing aid.

Sure, I had the same doubts everyone has. A hearing aid, no matter how small and how concealed in my long white hair, was just another symbol of aging. By refusing to get a hearing aid, I was, somehow, denying I was aging.

Well, of course, that kind of reasoning is nonsense.

Kate was harder to convince about joining the hearing aid crowd.

To begin with, her hearing was much better than mine. She was a borderline case. But in recent months,

she was missing a number of my pungent comments. Although I couldn't hear high pitches, her trouble was low pitches. We were both missing enough consonants to change the meaning of words and entire sentences. After I badgered her for six months, Kate forced herself to schedule an appointment with the same audiologist I used. Here's what happened when she visited our doctor's office: To evaluate Kate's hearing, Dr. Kirk Jackson, an ear, nose and throat physician, in our hometown of Frederick, Md., first took Kate's hearing history and her family's. Then Lori, Dr. Jackson's assistant, gave Kate a battery of hearing tests with a bunch of space age computers.

Jackson explained that Kate had a moderate hearing loss that probably would be helped with a digital hearing aid.

"But I'm not here to sell you a hearing aid. It has to be your decision," he stressed.

When Kate indicated, with my vigorous support, that she wanted to take the plunge, the doctor's aide described various makes priced anywhere from $800 to several thousand dollars. We did some comparison-shopping with other local doctors and found that Jackson's prices were competitive. We might have saved a few dollars at a discount department store but we wanted the continuing follow-up services the doctor offered.

The hearing aids come in different levels of sophistication. How many bells and whistles did we want - or need? Kate and I decided we would start out in the middle price range and see how that worked. I paid about $1,100 for mine and Kate paid $100 more. Unfortunately, neither Medicare nor our backup health plan covered the cost of the devices, so we had to shell out the money on our own.

I was just as concerned as Kate about keeping my hearing loss to myself. Like Kate, I chose an almost colorless GN Resound Plus Mini hearing aid that my hair covers almost completely. The hearing aid is guaranteed for two years. New wearers of hearing aids can return their models at the end of a month if they wish and get their money back except for about $150.

One financial drawback - our tiny batteries, priced at about $2 each, last only about two weeks at most. So we are always changing batteries at a cost of $100 a year. The doctor says that, so far, there are no rechargeable batteries that he knows of. Having worn a hearing aid now for a while, I'm amazed at how reluctant I was to get it. If I'd known how easy it was to wear and what a difference it makes in my hearing, I would have bought one much sooner.

Kate's aid is really invisible underneath her shock of red hair. She tested it out at a dinner party soon after getting it. Our sister-in-law, Charlotte, who has an eye like an eagle, never noticed it. She still doesn't know.

Resource: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association; 10801 Rockville Pike; Rockville, MD, 20852; 800-638-8255; www.asha.org.

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