

The Telegram

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Wrapped in a cocoon: Hard-of-hearing people say their plight is like being enveloped in plastic, but hearing aids can bring most people back into the land of the listening

Jean Edwards Stacey The Telegram

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Fifteen years ago, Leon Mills was sitting in a classroom at Memorial University when something happened that turned his life upside down.

"I was sitting in class thinking about nothing more than going to the Breezeway for a beer, when all of a sudden I couldn't hear the professor," he says. "I went from hearing to not hearing, just like that."

At the time, Mills was 28, a mature student. After finishing high school in Baie Verte he'd worked at various jobs before deciding to go to Memorial and become a teacher.

Following his sudden loss of hearing, an audiologist informed Mills there was a good chance his hearing would return, but at a reduced level. Three weeks later, his ears popped and he could once again hear. Problem was, though, everything sounded muffled.

Following graduation from Memorial, Mills taught physical education in Nain, Labrador. He also taught in a two-room school in Purbeck's Cove, White Bay, where he met a teacher named Jackie who became his wife.

But his hearing kept deteriorating and he found teaching increasingly difficult. So he went back to Memorial to do a master's degree in educational leadership with thoughts of getting into school administration. However, after he began doing volunteer work with the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association -- Newfoundland Chapter ([CHHA-NC](#)), he changed his mind and decided to make a career switch. He's now executive director of the [CHHA-NC](#).

Mills wears two hearing aids and has a 75 per cent hearing loss. He knows first-hand how hard it is to get used to being hard of hearing. He remembers feeling sorry for himself and recalls it took him a full six months to get used to wearing a hearing aid.

"People think hearing aids are a magic cure and that's not true," he says. "They're an audiological boost, not a cure for hearing loss. It takes time to adjust to wearing a hearing aid. Your ears are a funnel for sound and the brain is your computing centre. In the beginning, sounds get mixed up and the brain has trouble distinguishing what's what."

Mills is proof positive that you can successfully adjust to being hard of hearing and wearing a hearing aid. Having a conversation with him, you'd never know he was hard of hearing. The hearing aids he wears in each ear are hardly noticeable and the four-channel remote control he has clipped to his shirt pocket is no bigger than a cigarette lighter.

Because he pays strict attention to the person he's talking to, Mills is often complimented on being a good listener.

"People say, 'You're a fabulous listener,' " he says with a laugh, adding that people who are hard of hearing are obliged to listen carefully when they're spoken to. "It's mentally tiring. It's challenging. But you have to do the best you can."

Some of the things you can do to improve communication with a hard-of-hearing person include enunciating clearly without exaggeration; not shouting; using good pacing of speech and pauses; spelling out names and rephrasing repeated words.

Use body language, eye contact or discreet touch to get the person's attention before you speak. Keep your face in view for lipreading and speak directly to the person.

"Sometimes," grins Mills, "I have to let people know I'm hard of hearing, and tell them to look at me when they're speaking."

Hearing loss is an invisible disability that affects almost 2.5 million Canadians. One in 10 Canadians of all ages and more than 60 per cent of persons over 65 have hearing loss.

A small percentage of people are born with a hearing loss and many people lose some hearing as they get older.

Often the exact cause of hearing loss is unknown. At any age, common causes can be genetic factors, as in Mills' case; disease; side-effects of medication; noise damage or trauma.

Mills says being hard of hearing is difficult to describe in words.

When he does presentations, he tells his audience to imagine doing what they're doing now, and then all of a sudden being wrapped in a cocoon of plastic.

The feeling, he says, is one of intense isolation and loneliness.

Being hard of hearing is not a matter of life and death, but it does greatly affect your quality of life. Mills says that in some cases, being hard of hearing can result in a depression so severe people end up being institutionalized.

"So many people suffer hearing loss in silence and there's no need," he says. "Hearing aids are one way to stay in the hearing world."

The majority of people who suffer a hearing loss can get some help and that, says Mills, is where the **CHHA** can help. The association, established in 1982, is there to offer advice, encouragement and support. They can help people adjust to wearing hearing aids, they can tell you about the latest technological advances and give you information about prices.

"Help is available," says Mills. "You don't have to be alone and lonely."

Nationally and provincially, the **CHHA** is an advocacy group that promotes hearing accessibility in all activities of daily living, including the home, workplace, schools, churches, theatres, transport facilities and hotels. They promote technical supports such as assistive listening devices, hearing aids and captioning, as well as mandatory standards for them. They also promote self-help among hard-of-hearing and deaf persons in order to improve the quality of their lives.

On the provincial scene, there are plans to establish a regional co-ordinator in each of the province's health care districts. The co-ordinator would help with creating branches, and fund-raising. And, over the next five years, in keeping with a goal to have universal screening for all newborns, oto acoustic emission units will be donated to each of the province's 10 birthing hospitals. The units provide a computerized hearing test that measures high frequency sounds which emanate from the ears.

"The earlier children are identified as having hearing problems, the sooner parents can make decisions," says Mills. Parents may want to explore the possibility of a cochlear implant, in which electrodes that can receive sound signals are implanted in the inner ear. On the other hand, no child is too young to wear a hearing aid.

To get in touch with **CHHA-NC**, phone 753-3224. Fax 753-5640. Their Web site is www.netfx.iom.net/chha-nc. You can also write to **CHHA-NC**, 354 Water St., P.O. Box 5203, St. John's, NF, A1C 5V5.

How to know if you have hearing loss?

You may be losing your hearing when you:

- have to turn the volume up on the television set;
- think everyone else is mumbling;
- ask people to repeat themselves;
- find whispers impossible to hear;
- avoid social situations because of the strain of trying to hear.

What you can do about hearing loss?

- See your family physician for a hearing test.
- Get a hearing aid if one is recommended.
- If you have lost all your hearing, inquire about cochlear implants.
- Take a coping skills or speech-reading course.

Consumer advice for

buying hearing aids

Know your rights:

- You are entitled to a 30 to 60-day money-back guarantee for your trial of hearing aids. This does not include the ear moulds.
- Ask to try out different models if you are not completely satisfied.
- Ask for a telephone switch (T switch) on your aid and the opportunity to try it with an induction coil in the telephone. A flux coil in the earpiece of a telephone makes it compatible with a hearing aid which has a telephone switch. With the switch turned to the "T" position, and the volume control adjusted, the incoming voice is amplified, and background noises are practically eliminated.
- Ask about the compatibility of your hearing aid with assistive listening devices, which are particularly valuable for listening in a large group or in noisy situations.
- Talk to experienced hearing aid users before making a final purchase.

Mills says expect to pay anywhere from \$800 to \$2,000, or more, for a hearing aid. There are some circumstances in which the provincial government offers financial assistance. For further information give the **CHHA-NC** a call.

Beware of:

- Advertisements for free tests or other enticements.
- Ads that claim "exclusive" new technology.

If you have a problem, write a letter to the hearing aid supplier and send a copy to the CHHA. Describe the problem in detail and the solution you desire. Set a time limit, say 30 days, for a reply. If you don't get satisfaction, contact the CHHA again.

Figure:

Color Photo: Gary Hebbard, the Telegram

Some of the devices used by hard-of-hearing people.

Color Photo: Gary Hebbard, the Telegram

Leon Mills, executive director of the local Hard of Hearing Association, became hard of hearing suddenly at age 28.

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