# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About the Author</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Hearing Loss Journey</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-Centered Care in Four Easy Steps</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STEP 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner with Your Patient</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STEP 2:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Your Office Hearing Loss Friendly</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STEP 3:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embrace Creativity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STEP 4:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think Beyond the Technology</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For More Patient Perspective</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shari Eberts is a hearing health advocate, writer and avid Bikram yogi. She is the founder of LivingWithHearingLoss.com, an online community for people living with hearing loss and tinnitus, where she blogs about her experiences. She serves on the board of Hearing Loss Association of America and is the former Board Chair of Hearing Health Foundation.

Shari has an adult-onset genetic hearing loss and hopes that by sharing her story, it will help others to live more peacefully with their own hearing issues. Her writing has been featured in The Huffington Post, Woman’s Day, Good Housekeeping, Healthy Living Magazine, Audiology Practices and The Hearing Journal.

Prior to her advocacy work, Shari had a 20-year career in finance, most recently serving as Associate Director of U.S. Equity Research for JPMorgan. As a Senior Equity Research Analyst covering retail companies, she was frequently quoted in leading financial and retail industry publications and appeared on CNBC to discuss her stock views.

Shari holds a BS in Psychology from Duke University and an MBA from Harvard Business School. She lives in New York City with her husband and two children and is on the board of Lincoln Center Theater. Connect with Shari on Facebook and Twitter.

ABOUT THE IDA INSTITUTE

The Ida Institute is an independent, non-profit organization working to develop and integrate person-centered practice in hearing care. In 2018, the institute invited Shari to become a guest blogger to share her knowledge and perspectives on hearing loss. This e-book is a fruit of this collaboration. To learn more about person-centered hearing care connect with Ida on Facebook and Twitter or sign up for their free newsletter here.
When It All Began

I first noticed my hearing loss in my mid-20s at graduate school when I began missing things in class — a quiet comment that was made as an aside or under one’s breath. Sometimes the class would burst into laughter and I would be left wondering what was so funny. Other times I missed important clarifications from the professor.

I knew what the problem was. Both my father and grandmother had developed hearing loss as young adults. It was my turn. I went to get my hearing tested and was told I had mild hearing loss, too slight to treat. This surprised me since I was struggling in class, but with this excuse at hand, I chose to ignore my hearing issues, preferring denial to action.

This lasted several years, until I began a new job that involved more client contact. Now not only did I have trouble hearing in meetings, but I struggled to develop relationships with soft-spoken clients. Outside of work, I began avoiding friends that I could not hear easily. It was time for another hearing test.

This time, hearing aids were recommended and I was crushed. The stigma surrounding hearing loss had been very strong in my home growing up. I watched my father become isolated and alone, withdrawing from everyone in his life as he worried more about hiding his hearing loss than learning to communicate despite it.

At first, I wore my hearing aids only when absolutely necessary, but eventually I needed them almost all of the time. Still, I found myself avoiding many social situations and going out of my way to hide my hearing loss from others. I was following in my father’s footsteps.

But when I had children of my own, everything changed. I didn’t want them to see me hiding my hearing loss or being embarrassed by it. I needed to model better behavior in case one or both of them developed the condition. I had to accept my hearing loss. So I did. And now I am an advocate for people like me.
My Audiologist Experiences

For most people with hearing loss, an audiologist is the first hearing care provider they see. The influence an audiologist has on their new patient’s hearing loss journey cannot be overstated. It certainly was very important for me.

I arrived at my first audiologist appointment scared, uninformed and bogged down with the baggage of stigma. But despite a real concern that I was missing things in class, I was sent home without any new skills or devices that could help. The audiologist did not even suggest that perhaps a different seat in the classroom could be helpful. Thinking back on it now, this standard of care is very disappointing.

I have seen several audiologists in the years since that first visit. Only one asked me which hearing situations were most important to me. Only one (a different one) tested how well I heard when wearing my hearing aids. None recommended hearing loss support groups or shared communication best practices with me.

My care focused on which hearing aids to purchase rather than solving my communication problems. Only through my advocacy work and by meeting other people with hearing loss have I discovered the tips and tricks that I use today to lead a productive and happy life despite hearing loss.

“Person-centered care could have alleviated many of the problems I faced in the early years of my hearing loss.”
Person-Centered Care in Four Easy Steps

Person-centered care could have alleviated many of the problems I faced in the early years of my hearing loss. In this book, I look forward to describing what person-centered care means to me as a patient. The four main parts include:

1. Partner with Your Patient

Each person’s hearing loss journey is unique so a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Focusing on what is important to your patient will increase their satisfaction and improve compliance. See page 7.

2. Make Your Office Hearing Loss Friendly

Remember, people are there because they cannot hear well. Train your staff to use communication best practices and have assistive listening technology on hand to aid as needed. See page 11.

3. Embrace Creativity

Don’t get trapped in a hearing aid only approach. Linking aids to other assistive listening devices will give your clients greater access in a wider variety of situations. Stay current as new options become available. See page 15.

4. Think Beyond the Technology

Share basic communication tips with your patients and their families. Simple adjustments in behavior alone can increase communication success and lower frustration for both sides. See page 18.

Still not convinced person-centered care is right for you? Take a look at Ida’s Myth Busters, which dispels common fears about implementing a person-centered care approach for your practice.
STEP 1
Partner With Your Patient
My name was called and my heart jumped. I was here to get my hearing tested. It wasn’t the first time, but I knew my hearing problems had gotten worse. This time it was likely the audiologist would recommend hearing aids. I didn’t want them, but I knew it was time.

I didn’t know much about hearing loss or the types of hearing aids that were available. I had never heard of assistive listening devices or communication best practices for people with hearing loss. I expected lots of questions about where and when I had trouble hearing, but the conversation centered on the hearing aids. Did I want them to be visible? To have different programs? What was my budget?

I walked in scared, impressionable and looking for help. I walked out much the same way, but with a pair of hearing aids on order. A successful visit for my audiologist, but not for me. Once my hearing aids arrived, I had little motivation to wear them and a limited understanding of other things I could be doing to improve my chances for better communication. This could have been avoided if my audiologist had practiced person-centered care, especially the first tenet — Partner with Your Patient.

Each Hearing Loss Journey is Unique

Each person’s hearing loss journey is unique. Some people have had hearing issues since birth, others only a short time. The severity of hearing loss can vary widely, as does the curve of the audiogram. Some patients will be strong lip-readers, even without realizing it, while others will not. Lifestyles will differ. Some may need to communicate with people at work each day while others are retired or work independently. Some enjoy music or theater performances, while others prefer lectures or movies. Just like in the population at large, each of us with hearing loss is an individual. A one-size-fits-all approach to our hearing problems will not work.

While patient characteristics differ widely, many share the same feelings about their hearing loss — fear, anger, sadness, and frustration. Take time to understand each person’s hearing loss story. Not only will you show compassion and respect for their journey, you will learn critical details about their lifestyle and hearing goals. Combining these with analytical tools like audiograms and speech in noise tests, you can tailor your technology and rehabilitation recommendations to their specific needs. Focusing on the patient’s high priority items will boost patient satisfaction and compliance with the treatment plan.

“A one-size-fits-all approach to our hearing problems will not work. Focusing on the patient’s high priority items will boost patient satisfaction and compliance with the treatment plan.”
Why You Should Partner with Your Patient

Nobody understands a person’s hearing difficulties better than the person experiencing them, making their input of paramount importance. People want solutions for their specific communication challenges, not simply amplification. The first step in creating a successful treatment plan is finding out what the most important problems are from the patient’s perspective, something only they can provide.

1 ANALYTICS DON’T TELL THE FULL STORY

Audiograms and other tests are imperative in understanding absolute hearing thresholds, but they don’t reveal outside factors like the person’s work environment or what coping strategies they already employ. Focus on their individual priorities, not what worked for others with similar test results.

2 SHARED GOALS BUILD ENGTHUSIASM

Human nature suggests that when people are involved in the creation of a plan, they are more likely to support its goals and aid in its implementation. Building a treatment plan together will increase your patients’ motivation to take the steps required and keep them engaged in the process.

3 FOCUSED PLANNING STREAMLINES TREATMENT TIME

Investing time up-front to identify the person’s critical hearing issues will minimize follow up appointments because the hearing aids are not “working.” Together you can set realistic expectations, goals and deadlines for both of you, improving the efficiency and efficacy of your working relationship.
Focusing on the highest impact areas will help your patients experience improvements more quickly and in the areas that are most important to them, leading to higher satisfaction and better outcomes. Happy patients are more likely to recommend your services to a friend.

Engaged patients are more likely to include family in their treatment plan, leading to better insights into difficult communication situations from both perspectives. Incorporating the family’s input creates a strong support network for your patient where they need it most.

To prepare your patients for their first appointment with you, recommend they do some prep work ahead of time. Ask them to identify their most challenging communication problems and the top three situations where they desire improvement. You can create your own form or borrow from one or more of these Ida tools created for that purpose.
STEP 2
Make Your Office Hearing Loss Friendly
I leaned over the receptionist desk trying to grasp the words she was mumbling into her computer. Was I to take a seat? Fill out forms? Was she talking to somebody else? I wasn’t sure. All I knew is that I was surprised and disappointed. This was a doctor’s office that specialized in auditory issues. My appointment was to see the doctor and have my hearing tested by an audiologist. I had expected them to understand my communication challenges.

Sitting in the waiting area for my appointment to begin, I was on high alert. “If they called my name, would I hear them?” I wondered to myself. After my treatment at the check-in desk, I was worried, so I remained vigilant for the 20 minutes I waited to be called. I would have much preferred to read the book I had brought along with me to fill that time.

Checking out was stressful. The receptionist continued mumbling into her computer even after I told her that I could not hear what she was saying. I felt embarrassed, exhausted and disrespected. I never returned to that office again.

It takes patients an average of 7-10 years before they decide to treat their hearing loss – don’t scare them away at the first appointment. Person-centered care starts at the doorstep. Making your office hearing loss friendly from the moment they enter your clinic will help your patients feel like you are a true partner in their hearing care.

How to Make Your Office Hearing Loss Friendly

People come to your office because they cannot hear well. Treat them with respect from the moment they contact your office and through the entire appointment. Train your staff to use communication best practices, both in person and over the phone. Patients often arrive with anxiety about their hearing loss. Make sure your office gives them confidence that they have found the right partner to share their journey.

“

It takes patients an average of 7-10 years before they decide to treat their hearing loss – don’t scare them away at the first appointment.

IT STARTS WITH MAKING THE APPOINTMENT

Using the phone is challenging for many people with hearing loss. Make sure your receptionist speaks slowly and clearly, particularly when talking on the phone. Even better, allow patients to make or confirm appointments via email or an online system.
HELP YOUR PATIENTS PREPARE

Give your patients a chance to think about their communication needs and concerns before coming to their appointment. This will help them articulate the support they need from you and help you give them the support they need. The Ida Institute offers free online tools that can help your patients prepare for the appointment.

KEEP YOUR OFFICE QUIET AND WELL LIT

Background noise is uncomfortable for some people with hearing loss and makes it harder to hear. Use carpet or other sound absorbing materials to minimize sound. A well-lit office is also better for lipreading.

SHARE RELEVANT LITERATURE IN YOUR WAITING AREA

Provide information and brochures from local hearing loss support groups and recommend that your patients give one a try. If you are based in the US, Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) publishes a bi-monthly consumer magazine for its members featuring interesting articles for people with hearing loss.

ALERT PATIENTS PERSONALLY WHEN THE AUDIOLOGIST IS READY

Even in a small office, patients may have difficulty hearing if their name is called. Let them know you will tap them on the arm when it is their turn to see the audiologist so they can relax while waiting. In a larger office, a text message or email alert could also suffice.
6 DISPLAY YOUR FAVORITE HEARING LOSS ACCESSORIES SO YOUR PATIENTS CAN TRY THEM

Keep a portable hearing loop at your reception desk to aid with checking patients in and out. It can also be used to demonstrate T-coil functionality. Use a corner of your waiting area to highlight TV connectivity tools, captioned telephones and the latest apps or gadgets to make living with hearing loss easier. Your patients will thank you for the information.

7 SUPPLY A WRITTEN SUMMARY OF THE VISIT

Your patients may be missing important details about their care but are embarrassed to ask you to repeat them. Include test results, what they mean, and a list of recommended action items in writing at each appointment. A simple checklist keeps the message clear and does not take much time to complete. Patients can share this document with their family to keep them involved in their care and refer to it if they have questions after the appointment.

8 MAKE CHECKING OUT AT THE DESK STRESS-FREE

Your final touch point with your patient is often the reception desk where payment is transacted or a follow-up appointment is made. Make sure this process goes smoothly by providing hearing assistance through a hearing loop or a pocket talker device. Present all financial details in writing so the patient can review them clearly and without worry.

The look and feel of your office communicates a lot about you and is the first thing your patients will notice. A calm and accessible environment will inspire your patients to approach the appointment with optimism and an open mind.
STEP 3

Embrace Creativity
I love my hearing aids and wear them all the time. They help me hear better at home and at work, with friends, family and colleagues. But there are certain situations where hearing aids alone are not enough. Additional assistance is needed. Like when I am at the movies and use caption readers to augment the sound or attend the theater and enjoy a hearing loop. Other activities — going to a loud restaurant, talking on the phone or watching TV — are almost always a challenge, even with my hearing aids tuned in and turned up.

In these situations, assistive listening devices can be a big help, but when I ask my audiologists about them, I rarely get much information. They might suggest using a different program on my hearing aids, or adjusting the volume, but rarely provide more creative solutions. Most of the innovations I use today I learned from other people with hearing loss or from experimenting with work-arounds on my own. This shouldn’t be the case.

People with hearing loss come to their audiologist looking for answers that work for their specific hearing challenges. Don’t get trapped in a hearing aid only approach. Linking aids to other assistive listening devices will give your clients greater access in a wider variety of situations, an important goal of person-centered care.

Ways to Embrace Creativity In Your Audiologist Practice

I imagine most audiologists are eager to provide creative solutions to their patients, but perhaps they are not sure how to do it. Their training was focused on a very specific set of tests, measurements and procedures, and may have overlooked a more flexible approach to patient care. Operating outside the box is challenging, but can also be incredibly satisfying. Try these suggestions to jumpstart your creativity so you can better provide person-centered care for your patients. Your practice will thrive as a result.

1

Spend a Day in Your Patients’ Shoes

Wear earplugs to experience difficulty hearing in a variety of environments. Wear them to dinner with your family, at an important office meeting and during your morning commute. The more you understand about the challenges your patients face, the more gifted you will be at finding solutions that work.

“Don’t get trapped in a hearing aid only approach. Linking aids to other assistive listening devices will give your clients greater access in a wider variety of situations, an important goal of person-centered care.”
2 TRY THE DEVICES YOURSELF

With appropriate volume controls, spend several days wearing hearing aids. How do the ear molds feel? Do the aids whistle in certain situations? What is it like to talk on the phone or eat in a noisy restaurant? You might discover some tricks to share with your patients.

3 EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY

Explore various assistive listening technologies, perhaps in conjunction with your hearing aid wearing adventures. You will find that different tools will help in different situations. Some, like Roger pens may be from traditional hearing aid companies, while others may be apps or over-the-counter devices. The more you know, the better you can guide your patients towards quality alternatives at a variety of price points.

4 PROMOTE T-COIL TECHNOLOGY

T-coils are not new, but many audiologists do not make patients aware of this useful technology. Please do, since T-coils can be life changing for many hearing aid wearers, particularly as looping systems become more prevalent globally.

5 RECOGNIZE TECHNOLOGY IS HARD

Your patients need and appreciate your expertise and advice on which solutions are worth trying. When the United States market opens for OTC hearing aids, technological advancement will only accelerate. Your skills will be incredibly valuable as clients learn to navigate this changing landscape.

6 UNBUNDLE YOUR FEES

Charging for your expertise and time rather than wrapping this all into the purchase of a hearing aid will help your clients better understand the value you provide. It may also shift your focus towards finding solutions more generally rather than selling hearing aids. Some patients might do better with alternative devices at first.

Don’t be left behind. Innovation is the only constant in technology and in patient care. Staying on top of advancements will help you deliver superior care to your patients and keep your practice at the forefront of person-centered care.
STEP 4
Think Beyond the Technology
Please face me when you talk to me,” I remind my family and friends. At dinner I might add, “Please let me sit in the corner so I can avoid the background noise.” The list goes on. While hearing aids and other assistive listening devices provide significant assistance, communication best practices are also critical — both for the people with hearing loss and their communication partners.

For years I was unaware of many of these communication tricks. My conversations with family, friends and co-workers would sometimes be stilted since I would hear only part of what they said. I would often try to fake it, or use context clues to keep the dialogue going, but it was exhausting and unsatisfying — for both sides. Sometimes I would simply withdraw in defeat, not knowing there were so many other things I could do besides wearing my hearing devices to help me hear better.

Over time, I learned tips and tricks from my hearing loss friends or through trial and error. Things like setting up the ground rules for communication ahead of time when in a group or arriving early to a lecture to make sure I scored an advantageous seat — one with good sightlines to the primary speaker. I still wonder why I had to learn these tricks on my own rather than from my audiologist at the very start of my hearing loss journey. Person-centered care could have prevented years of unsatisfying conversations with loved ones and friends.

What It Means to Think Beyond the Technology

Hearing aids are miraculous tools, but communication best practices are equally important, particularly when your patient is in a difficult listening environment like a restaurant, office meeting, or party. The more tricks those of us with hearing loss have in our toolbox, the more likely we are to have successful communication experiences, which is the ultimate goal of person-centered care. Please don’t focus on only one part of the equation. Think beyond the technology to help your patient enjoy better conversations with all the important people in their lives, no matter the situation.

Person-centered care could have prevented years of unsatisfying conversations with loved ones and friends.
1

SHARE BEST PRACTICE COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR THE SPEAKER

Create your own cheat sheet of tips or borrow from reputable sources. Listing these tips on the back of the written summary report that you provide to patients at each visit will highlight their importance and make them easy to share with their communication partners. You can find my list of tips here. Hearing Loss Association of America also has an excellent card with communication tips. Or you can explore the Ida Institute’s Top Tips for Managing Conversations Well.

2

TEACH BEST PRACTICE TIPS FOR THE LISTENER/PATIENT

Communication is a two way street. While many communication best practices rely on the patient’s communication partners to make accommodations, there are also things the patient can do. Advise them to schedule important conversations for the morning, before hearing loss exhaustion kicks in from a day of listening challenges. Remind them that being well rested and in good health is also important for maintaining mental focus. See my full list of tips for the patient here.

3

PROMOTE SELF-ADVOCACY SKILLS

Patients must learn to ask for the assistance they need from their communication partners. Encourage empowerment and teach patients ways to ask for the help they need. This can include setting ground rules for conversations up front (i.e., only one person speak at a time, etc.) or using non-verbal cues like placing a hand behind your ear to let the speaker know you are having trouble hearing without interrupting the flow of the conversation.
ENCOURAGE USE OF CAPTION READERS, HEARING LOOPS, AND OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

The more these types of devices are requested and utilized in public spaces, museums, theaters and elsewhere, the more commonplace they will become. Sending a thank you note to an institution that provided excellent hearing access can help cement its use for others.

RECOMMEND HEARING LOSS SUPPORT GROUPS

Meeting other people with hearing loss helped me build confidence and overcome my feelings of hearing loss stigma. I learned many tips and tricks from my hearing loss friends that I use today to live my best life despite hearing loss. If there is not a local hearing group in your area, consider starting one. Community support is critical to better hearing outcomes.

Audiologists are often a patient’s first call when struggling with their hearing loss.

While hearing aids and other devices are critical to communication, patients’ behaviors and those of their communication partners can go a long way towards making conversations more satisfying. Thinking beyond the technology will help your patients have the fullest toolbox possible to achieve their communication goals and mark you as a leader in person-centered care.
Shari Eberts is available for speaking engagements and interviews related to person-centered care from the patient perspective and a variety of hearing loss topics.

Inquire via email to shari@livingwithhearingloss.com.