

World Hearing Day 3 March**JET Employment Co-ordinator Nick Ozouf talks about his experience of hearing loss**

My hearing impairment which I have suffered since about 1999 was caused by Meniere's Disease. This is a problem of the inner ear causing severe dizziness and a loss of hearing function. Over time the spells of dizziness disappear but, in my experience, at least, the hearing deteriorates. I started by needing just one hearing aid, but then progressed to having to use two. Over the years the aids have needed to be more powerful to make up for the deterioration in my hearing. I also suffer from tinnitus.



I was given a hearing aid to improve my hearing loss, but also it helped and still helps to mask the tinnitus, although that's always there in the background. The challenge with my hearing loss is that it's been a gradual loss over the years and I've not always been aware of the amount of the deterioration until it was pointed out by someone else. I am now at the point where it's a profound loss. I can't hear much without them.

The first challenge is that a hearing impairment can be an invisible disability. Unless you tell people that you have an impairment or they see that you are wearing hearing aids it's impossible for them to know. The other challenge is simply stated, hearing and understanding clearly, is much more difficult to overcome. These challenges apply throughout my life either work or private.

I struggle in noisy environments like restaurants, discos, bars, open offices, in fact any background noise makes it harder, sometimes impossible for me to hear. This has an impact on life in general because you might be out with a group of friends or colleagues and you want to join in with the conversation, but cannot do so. This can lead to feeling isolated even within your own family or social group. It's not necessarily their fault, people will do their best to involve you, it's more often due to the environment.

Another factor is meeting new people, at least in a social rather than work situation, it does get embarrassing when you can't hear what someone has said and you have to ask them to repeat themselves several times, and then still not know what they said. You can end up giving some ridiculous answers.

There is various technological help available now to help with daily tasks and life in general, from microphones to help with listening to music, the radio or the tv. Smartphones with Bluetooth connections have made this help much more accessible and user-friendly. There are numerous apps available, for phones or other devices, to help someone hear or understand more clearly and they are available in almost every language. This technology has helped me immeasurably not only to do my job as an Employment Co-ordinator with JET but socially as well.

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What employers can do

Employers can help hearing-impaired employees by some simple steps.

- Make sure that the person knows that you are speaking to them.
- Make sure that you are facing the person when talking to them.
- Don't cover your mouth.
- Speak clearly, don't mumble, it helps someone to lip read.
- If someone asks you to repeat something, speak it clearly, it is not always necessary to speak louder or shout.
- Give instructions in writing rather than verbally, eg by email.
- In the office, seat the person with their back to the wall, this will help reduce background noise, perhaps not much, but every little helps.
- In training or meetings, give the person any handouts prior to the start, this will help them to follow what's happening or being said.
- Try to use meeting rooms with good acoustics, ask the person for their opinion of which room suits them the best.

These steps cost nothing and can be followed by everyone in an organisation or company.

If the person requires some technological piece of equipment to enable them to do their job then they can apply for financial aid from Social Security through the Access to Work grant.

All this makes my life sound very difficult but it's not, I am in a far better position than somebody who is a British Sign Language (BSL) user. Communication and accessing information is far harder for them, despite there being technological help available, and there is a shortage of BSL interpreters in the Island at present.

The Government, together with the Royal Association for the Deaf (RAD), and other charities and groups who support the dDeaf Community in Jersey are working very hard to try and overcome the challenges faced by the whole dDeaf community and progress is being made.

If anybody is suffering hearing loss and needs help and advice, then they should contact the Audiology Department at the General Hospital. They have all the knowledge and access to all the possible hearing aids and associated equipment.

This is my story and my experience, and everybody's experience of hearing impairment will be different, all I can say is talk to someone and seek help.