

Excuse me, *WHAT?*

My Hearing Journey by Abby Stonehouse

My Nanna was a sweet and caring lady. Every time I went over to visit, I could expect two things: a \$5 allowance, and what my chubby little kid's dreams were all about—an amazing home-cooked meal.

Nanna was also my first exposure to someone who was hard of hearing. Having become hard of hearing decades before my birth, by the time I came around, there were unspoken rules to follow. Each time I would step through through her doorway, my voice became louder, deeper, and the pace of my speech would slow.

When I was 15, my family started speaking to my father in the same way. With some old-fashioned mom arm-twisting, he was eventually fitted with a hearing aid. So, close to home, I grew up with empathy for the hard of hearing community. I remember sitting at Nanna's amazing meals, getting a bit sad for her because she couldn't always hear what was going on. I also felt sad for my father not being able to keep up with the table banter between my sister and me.

Even though I grew up with this much exposure, I never gave my hearing much thought. When I turned 25, I lived a rather productive life: I was in university, living in a one-bedroom apartment in NDG and having the time of my life. However, according to chick flicks and young women on social media, I wasn't. Going to bars or restaurants was a struggle. I sat there trying so hard to hear what my friends were saying, wanting desperately to join in the conversation, and regale them with my charm and wit (or lack of it). When I ventured into the world, I would go home exhausted and frustrated. Being social became sitting at home with a bag of pretzels, texting people about the funny episode of whatever TV show I was binge watching. Not socializing at all became the norm.

It was around this time family and friends voiced their concerns. They noticed the signs long before I did. Like Nanna and dad, they adapted their voices to compensate for my hearing. A part of me didn't want to get tested. In my mind, I was a successful university student, I was fine, or should I say in complete denial. Knowing what I know now, however, it was clear I compensated immensely. I was always sitting in the front in the classroom, and unbeknownst to me, I was speechreading the people I interacted with.

Cliffs of Moher
from Ireland



***“ What I thought would be a negative, the hearing aids, ”
were ultimately allowing me to live.***

I finally got my hearing tested three years ago. When I made the appointment, my mother insisted on coming with me. I found that odd but well in line with her overbearing mothering style (which I love her for.... most of the time). I only recently learned that when I was in the sound proof booth, she had told the audiologist she was there because she knew I wouldn't like the results and would be there when I broke down and cried.

I came out of the testing booth and the energy had changed from when I first went in. I learned I had a moderate hearing loss and getting hearing aids would be beneficial. I was devastated. At the time I thought having hearing aids would have a negative impact on my life. I thought having these devices in my ears would change how people saw me, or how they treated me. Ultimately, I didn't want to be different.

The months following being fitted with hearing aids were tough. Those of you who have them know well enough there is a big adjustment period. I remember driving home with these new sounds assaulting my senses and asking myself: Do I really need to hear this much? Why does my car sound like a 4 x 4 in rough terrain? (Because you drive a 10-year-old clunker, Abby. Deal with it).

Starting my second year at university, with my new ears to the world, I reached out to the Access Centre for Students with Disabilities at Concordia University, a service I'm very thankful for. I was able to have transcribers for my classes and take my exams in different exam rooms to avoid background noise. I was also put in contact with an academic/life coach for the rest of my university years. This person helped me adjust to life with hearing aids. Most importantly, they taught me how to advocate for myself and not to be ashamed of being hard of hearing.

Slowly, my brain began to adjust to listening in a new way. My behaviour started to change for the better. I became more confident about going into social situations. I stopped spending time with the pretzels on my couch; instead, they now resided in my purse. I spent more time with friends, went on dates and made new friends at school. With this new-found confidence, I started pursuing something that I never thought I would do. I started going on stage and pursuing my stand up comedy dreams. I have been getting up on stage for about a year now, which has been more fulfilling than I could have ever imagined. What I thought would be a negative, the hearing aids, were ultimately allowing me to live.

As CHIP/CAPA's new Program Coordinator, I am very passionate about helping the hard of hearing community thrive. Having hearing aids, or other assistive listening devices, should not hold you back from participating in life. They should help you move forward in a more successful way.



Abby Stonehouse is the Program Coordinator at CHIP/CAPA. She is a recent graduate of Concordia University, with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology. She is also a stand-up comedian, who made her OFFJFL debut this summer at the Just for Laughs 2018 festival.