

# I Can Hear You But I Can't Understand You

by Ann Liming

When hard of hearing people have difficulty understanding a conversation, they often say to the speaker, "I can't hear you." In many cases it may be more accurate to say, "I can't understand you."

## Loudness

Many people believe that speaking loudly is the most important thing to do to help the hard of hearing person hear. While loudness is a factor, when someone shouts, words become distorted and the shouting gives the impression that the person is angry. It may be that other components of speech contribute more to communication misunderstandings than the loudness of the words.

## Clarity

The component of speech referred to as clarity is critical to understanding speech. Many hard of hearing people have a sensorineural type of hearing loss, which means we do not hear well in certain frequencies or pitch ranges. Vowel sounds are heard in the low pitch ranges where most male voices or a bass drum are heard. Consonant sounds are heard in the high pitch ranges where one hears a flute or a child's voice. If a person has a loss in the high pitch range, they have difficulty hearing s, sh, t, th, p, k, d and other consonant sounds. For this reason they may hear only parts of a word. A statement such as "Who you are makes a difference", may be heard as "ho ou are akes a eference". To the person with a loss in certain pitch ranges, the message is often garbled and sounds like a foreign language.

## Rate

How fast a person talks is another component of speech that affects ability to understand spoken words. When a person speaks very rapidly, as often happens when the speaker is rushed, it becomes very difficult for the hearing mechanism to receive, transport and then interpret the message in the brain. To understand what is being said it may be necessary to ask the person to speak more slowly.

Understanding these three components of speech: loudness, clarity and rate can guide us in telling a speaker what to do to help us hear. It can also help the non hard of hearing person ask what might help someone who is hard of hearing. Yes, we do sometimes need them to speak a little more loudly, but we may also need them to adjust other components of their speech to help us understand them better.