

**Relaxation Training**  
**For**  
**People Who Are Hard of Hearing**  
**By**  
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**Another book in the Living With Hearing Loss series**

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## Introduction

All people encounter difficult or problematic situations from time to time. All people experience stress from a variety of sources. Some people develop effective coping strategies that enable them to surmount or co-exist with life's problems and stresses. Other people develop ineffective coping strategies that either fail to resolve their difficulties or actually make things worse.

Subgroups of the human population experience the usual vicissitudes of life plus a set of issues, concerns, dilemmas, and problems common to their particular group. People who are hard of hearing, as a group, face some challenges, barriers, difficulties, and problems that hearing people do not share. Deaf people, as a group, differ in these somewhat as compared to people who are hard of hearing. Various subgroups of deaf people can further be identified as having somewhat unique experiences and problems, e.g., deaf children of deaf parents within the deaf community vs. deaf children of hearing parents with no link to the deaf culture. Certain situations are particularly distressing to people who are hard of hearing as a group. These situations have the following common factors:

- a) Something interferes with communication, e.g., noisy room, poor telephone connection, speaker facing away from listener, speaker talks too fast or too softly) that puts the person who is hard of hearing at a disadvantage and frequently has negative physical and emotional consequences.
- b) The person who is hard of hearing has to maintain a high level of alertness or vigilance to be aware of and/or to receive the auditory information from the environment. This sustained visual and auditory attention requires a great deal of effort and, over time, contributes greatly to physical and psychological fatigue.

Both of these factors may be further complicated by other physiological factors related to the person's hearing loss, e.g., chronic ear infections, tinnitus, or dizziness due to inner ear problems. Any or all of these may be occurring at a given time. Each produces distress and increased body tension. Prolonged body tension becomes, itself, a source of distress and often leads to fatigue and physical and psychological *dis-ease*.

Distress produces changes in the body. One major change is increased muscle tension, which may show itself generally throughout the body or in a specific area such as the neck, shoulders, back and/or head. Several types of headaches are produced by increased muscle tension. Anything a person can do to lower the level of muscle tension will help to lessen the general level of distress experienced.

There are other important changes in the body also associated with distress. Heart rate may increase or decrease, blood pressure may rise or fall, and blood flow may be altered producing cold hands and feet. Increased sweating may be noticed. Changes in the digestive system may produce cramping, nausea, or bowel problems.

## **Examples of Body Reactions to Distressing Situations**

Mary Lou has had a successful career as an office manager. She is intelligent, articulate, competent and personable. Over the years she has experienced a gradual and progressive loss of hearing. At age 50 she has considerable difficulty conversationally and on the telephone. Mary Lou is very much afraid that her hearing loss will jeopardize her job if her employer finds out. So, Mary Lou resorts to bluffing. She pretends to understand when she doesn't. This strategy results in many uncomfortable situations in which she becomes more and more confused. During these times, Mary Lou begins to perspire a lot, feels generally shaky and weak and, if the situation continues, experiences stomach cramping and nausea.

Frances wears two hearing aids and functions quite well in most situations. She is a real estate agent by profession and is forced to use the telephone frequently. Depending on the speaker and the connection, she understands well or not so well on the phone. Frances' tension level while using the telephone is particularly high in conversations directly involving her income. Take the recent example of a foreign diplomat who was seeking information concerning a \$500,000 home in the Washington, D.C. area. He was barely intelligible to her on the phone, and she had to ask him to repeat many, many times. During the first two minutes of the conversation, the back of Frances' neck began to stiffen and hurt. This muscle tension spread to her shoulder blades. Within five minutes she began to experience a tension headache spreading from the back of her head to her forehead. By the eighth minute, the headache was so intense that it further interfered with Frances' ability to hear over the phone.

Joanne (normally hearing person) is driving on the Beltway in rush hour traffic with her sister who is hard of hearing. Joanne has to be directly facing her sister and enunciating clearly in order to be understood. The traffic is stop and go and requires 100% of Joanne's attention to avoid an accident. But, she must frequently turn and face her sister in order to relay information concerning the morning's news events. Joanne begins to grasp the wheel tightly, producing aching in her upper arms. There is also increased tension in her upper leg muscles, which produces painful sensations. As the tension mounts, Joanne holds her breath for periods of time, and when she breathes, she takes rapid, shallow breaths. This produces an oxygen deficit in her body, resulting in feelings of panic and fatigue. She begins to feel that she can't cope with the situation and snaps at her sister.

Audrey wears two hearing aids and must keep her attention carefully focused in order to hear what is being said. She is working at her first job and feels that she must do everything perfectly in order to compensate for her hearing loss. She also believes that she must take on every assignment asked of her, because, "Being hard of hearing, I really don't have the same latitude as my fellow employee". Audrey over-functions at work, taking on more and more responsibilities without lowering her impossibly high performance standards. By mid-morning, she is tense as a board and experiences difficulties in concentrating. She finds her attention wandering from task to task and is not moving very far forward with any of them. She begins making mistakes and her general tension level increases to the point where she gets a migraine headache. As the day progresses, the migraine pain increases and she can focus her attention less and less. Audrey is feeling sick to her stomach and is falling farther and farther behind in her work.

These examples illustrate some of the causes and effects of tension. In all of these cases the people could profit, and some did, by a training program, which would teach them to be in better control of their body processes. In each case, as the physical symptoms increased, they added to the overall distress—sometimes actually becoming the major stressors themselves, as in example of the migraine headaches.

## **Effects of Muscle Tension and Anxiety on Communication**

Dictionaries generally define *anxiety* as a “tense emotional state.” When people believe they are endangered in some way, physically or psychologically, a natural response is to assume a protective or defensive attitude. Part of this attitude is the increased muscle tension that prepares people to combat (fight) the situation or to escape from it (flight). *Combat* means taking action to deal or cope with the situation.

One type of situation that produces anxiety for many people is failing to understand or not being sure one understands what is being said, especially in situations where understanding is deemed to be important. This is a common fact of life for many people who are hard of hearing. Throughout each day we encounter situations in which we either know that we have not understood or are not sure we understand what is being said. A common response to these situations is anxiety and its attendant increase in muscle tension. The cumulative effect of these situations over days, weeks, or months, let alone years, can be devastating both physically and psychologically. The specific physical and psychological effects that people who are hard of hearing often report are:

**Fatigue.** Chronic increase in muscle tension throughout the body or in specific areas produces fatigue. Participants in our coping strategies groups often report things such as, “By Friday evening, I’m exhausted; I spend most of the weekend sleeping in order to have enough energy to return to work on Monday” Chronic fatigue is debilitating in many ways and can, itself, lead to depression. Increased muscle tension for people who are hard of hearing occurs in at least two ways:

1. Muscle tension associated with anxiety (as part of the protective or defensive attitude mentioned above), and
2. Muscle tension associated with postural changes adopted in an attempt to hear what is being said. In groups of people who are hard of hearing you will notice many of them sitting forward in their chairs or craning their necks with their heads six to ten inches forward of a natural sitting posture. People who are hard of hearing also frequently find it necessary to make many postural changes such as head or body turning in order to face and see people who are speaking. All of these postural adjustments involve increased muscle tension, which adds up over time to produce fatigue.

Fatigue makes it very difficult for listeners who are heard of hearing to pay attention to the person who is speaking; it is very difficult to pay attention to *anything* when one is tired.

**Distracting sensations.** Increased, intense, and/or long-term muscle tension can lead to physical sensations that are distressing and distracting. Many people report uncomfortable sensations of muscle tightness in their upper back, shoulder, or neck. For some, these sensations are painful. For example, many headaches are produced by muscle tension in the upper back, neck, and scalp muscles. Have you ever sat in a meeting while experiencing pain or discomfort in some part of your body? Did you find your attention divided between what was going on at the meeting and the pain or discomfort? It is very difficult to pay attention to what is going on around us when we are experiencing a tension headache or other distressing sensations associated with muscle tension.