

COVID and communication

Back to the Future's Doc to Marty
"Marty whatever you do, don't go to the year 2020"

By Dirk de Moore — Audiologist, Bendigo Hearing Clinic

As I write this, Central Victoria is still under stage 3 restrictions and even if they are lifted soon, we will be living with ongoing restrictions of some sort for a long time. COVID-19 has affected our way of life but also impacted our ability to communicate.

While it is the hearing impaired, who I deal with most, who have been severely impacted, we all will have to live with three key factors that will continue to affect our communication.

Face masks

Who would have thought as the new year dawned that by spring we would all be walking around in face masks. Washable cloth masks are quite popular and comfortable and better for the environment, given that I recently read we are using a staggering 129 billion disposable masks worldwide each month. Apart from not seeing someone's expression, masks adversely impact communication in two ways. First, they act as an acoustic barrier and drop the speech signal anywhere from three decibels to 12 decibels with the N95 respirator masks. They acoustically act as a lowpass filter, allowing low speech sound through but reducing high-pitched sounds, making it even harder to hear that young girl at the checkout.

However, the most obvious impact masks have is to reduce our ability to lip read. Those with

significant hearing loss can lip read anywhere from up to 50 percent to 80 percent of speech, but we all gain about 15 percent of speech understanding from lip reading. A simple exercise to demonstrate this is to watch the nightly news and cover the TV with a blanket, then turn the volume down to a level where you can't quite follow the speech. Remove the blanket and you'll be able to follow every word. As I write this, the Swiss are patenting clear facial masks that won't fog up.

Social distancing

For 37 years as an audiologist, I've been telling people to move closer together. Now we are telling everybody to move further apart!

Understanding speech relies on gaining a person's attention, facing them and being close enough to allow them to hear you. Social distancing makes it harder to understand speech because every time we double the distance from someone, say from the mandated 1.5 metres to three metres, we drop the speech signal by six decibels. Also, we are pushing them potentially closer to other distracting noises like traffic or air conditioners, thereby further reducing the signal-to-noise ratio and hence speech understanding.

Poor internet speed

Now this is where I could get all political and bang



on about why we just didn't spend the money and build the NBN properly.

Poor internet speeds and connectivity are not helping communication during this pandemic. Zoom conferences range from high to appalling in quality with images sometimes freezing, faces fuzzy and the sound often distorted.

Looking at measures to improve your internet connectivity and even investing in good-quality headphones, or better still if you have even a mild hearing loss, the latest hearing aids that have superb Bluetooth streaming capability, will improve your chances of successful communication.

Stay safe, stay well, stay positive.

For more advice on improving your hearing and ability to communicate, make an appointment at the Bendigo Hearing Clinic on 5442 5800 or visit www.bendigohearingclinic.com.au

Life Amplified



Ilan – wine maker, pharmacist, hearing aid user

DIRK de MOORE – Audiologist

- Latest technology
- Hearing assessments & hearing aid fitting
- 60 day trial periods
- Cosmetically appealing solutions
- Worksafe, industrial, earplugs
- Professional independent advice

(03) 5442 5800 13 Rowan St, Bendigo

www.bendigohearingclinic.com.au



BENDIGO
HEARING CLINIC

life amplified