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## Luncheon Speech by Sam Trychin

Sam Trychin

Hearing loss is a communication disorder. And for most people who have hearing loss of any level, communication is the major problem. Over the 20 years that I have been talking to groups of people with hearing loss, the same complaints pop up over and over again. We will talk about issues of hearing family members, as well as issues of those, who like myself, have a hearing loss. Then we will talk about solutions. It does no good to talk about complaints if we do not also tackle solutions to it.

The first complaint we hear from family members is that they feel they never know when they are being understood. Sometimes they assumed they were understood and found out two days later, when it was too late, that in fact they were not. But when they repeat themselves and ask if they are being understood they may get snapped at: "I heard you the first time."

We have to inform others about what we have heard. We have to let others know what we have understood that they said by repeating back the key elements. That way we create a situation where we can be corrected if we need it. Now the reason that we get into this is that people who have some residual hearing, particularly people who have hearing loss in the high-frequency areas of speech, will misunderstand a lot of what's being said.

One of my frequently told stories is about being in a car going from the Los Angeles airport to Riverside, California, with five others, all of us hard of hearing or deaf. I was sitting in the back seat next to the window on the left, and a woman, wearing two hearing aids, was sitting in the middle of the back seat. She lived in Riverside, so she had come to the airport to guide us. As we drove we passed a building, and I asked her: "What's the name of that building?" "Not very far" she replied. And I said, "No, no, no, you didn't understand what I asked you. I asked you the name of that building we just passed." And she replied again, "Not very far." Now, at this point I am getting cranky, and I want to solve this, so I tried again. "About a mile ago we passed a large tower-like structure, and I want to know its name." And she said, "It's Knott's Berry

Farm." What struck me about all this is that I would have bet 1,000 dollars I was right and she was wrong. I was absolutely convinced that I had heard her correctly and she had misheard me. Absolutely convinced.

I think back to the time when Bill Clinton was running for president for the first time. I was listening to the radio one morning, and I heard the announcer say, "Voters don't like politicians who take aspirin." And I thought: what a weird poll! Now they're going through people's medicine cabinets to find out what they take to see if they should vote for someone. So I listened more carefully, and it became obvious that what had been said is that "Voters don't like politicians who take action." And I thought, look at what my brain just did. I heard an "a," then, "n," then my brain filled in the gap with a word that was in my lexicon. I didn't stand there and say, "Let's see what would be a good word to fit what I heard." It doesn't happen like that. Your brain fills in those gaps automatically. If you are lucky, it fills in the gap with something that's correct. If you are lucky, it fills in the gap with something that's so weird that you check it out because it just doesn't sound right. If you are not so lucky, it fills in the gap with something that fits the context but is wrong. And this can be a real problem in every sense of the word. It the boss tells you not to go over 15,000 on a contract and you hear 50,000 and sign that contract you may be out of a job, and your boss may be out of business.

These things happen to us all the time, involuntarily. They happen in such a way that it's imperative that we check out with other people the important elements of what we heard them say. It is the only way that I can ever be sure that I have understood what is said to me. And it's the only way you will ever know.

The other complaint that we hear from family members again concerns those who have some residual hearing. What we hear from family is that it drives them crazy that sometimes we seem to hear everything very well and other times we don't seem to understand anything. "She can understand me when she wants to," they may say. And those of you in the audience who have been the recipient of that statement know that you want to kill whoever says that.

But there is a reason they say it. We do understand very well in some circumstances, but not in others, and it is very confusing for people with normal hearing who are talking to us to try to figure out why. So we need to educate family members. We have to educate ourselves about the 40 or 50 different causes of communication breakdowns.

I lump them into three different categories. One of the categories is something about the speaker. There may be something about the person talking to me that will influence whether I understand them or not. The first thing, obviously, is if they don't get my attention before they begin to talk. If they don't do that, I don't have a clue that they're even talking to me.

But there are other things--such as talking too fast. If they talk too fast, if they talk too low, or slow or loud—any one of these variables can interfere with communication. Anything about the speaker that's distracting and takes your attention away from what they're saying may well interfere with your ability to understand what is being said.

We also need to know distances, which is a big factor if you are relying on residual hearing. I need to realize and tell people that if they are talking to me from four feet away I may be fine, but if they move to eight feet away I am not going to hear them half as well. And people don't understand that and get confused and start to blame me for not understanding when, in fact, it's the distance variable.

Another variable is acoustics. At home in our dining room we have a plain wooden table and chairs and a bare wooden floor. There are light curtains on the windows and so sound travels around but it may reverberate a little bit. If I move into the living room where we have heavy-stuffed furniture and thick rugs on the floor as well as heavy drapes on the window the sound gets absorbed very quickly and doesn't travel very far. So I may understand quite well in the dining room but not in the living room and may be blamed for having selective hearing or for not paying attention, when in fact it is the environment.

These are the reasons that people who live with those of us who have hearing problems need to understand the properties of sound and how sound travels. They need to understand what our audiogram look like--what the frequencies are that we don't hear and what sounds are difficult or impossible for us to hear.

What do hard of hearing people complain about? One of the things they complain about is the fact that people talk to them without getting their attention. This is a major problem. And then, of course, family members complain because they say they talk to him and he simply doesn't pay attention. So we have an attention variable on both sides. Can you believe that people who don't hear well might not pay attention very well? Doesn't that sound strange? But actually I think that if you have any level of hearing loss and are not relying on sign language, you are at high risk for losing the skill of paying attention. For example, think about what would happen if I were standing here talking all this time to you in Russian. What would you be doing? Would you be sitting there straining to understand what I was saying? No.

After about a minute and a half, you would be gone. You would be doing your bills in your head. You would be thinking about your date next week or last week. That's what happens to people who don't hear well in situations where it's very difficult to understand. The most normal and natural thing to do is to space out. The problem is that you can do this for so long that you stop attending altogether. You lose the ability to focus attention on what is being said and attention training may be necessary.

You can do simple attention training at home by having a family member pick up a magazine and read a couple of sentences and then you repeat what has been said. Then over time you are forced to pay attention to what's being said. This also gives the family member an opportunity to begin to get an idea which sounds you have difficulty understanding.

I went through the Walter Reed Hearing Aid Program in 1953. It was a two month long aural rehabilitation program, an in-patient program. Part of the program was that everyday they would show you a black-and-white film that would last ten minutes. And there was no sound to it. For example, one that I remember is that they took a movie camera and went through a house room by room, and at the end of the film they would ask you a series of questions about what you had seen. If you were watching carefully you began to pick up tiny details like the time on a clock face or the date on a newspaper. They had a number of films like that that taught us to rely on vision more. About five years ago I did some work with this program which is now a week long and out-patient, and nobody there has ever seen these films. And I think we should be using this kind of thing again. It is relatively simple to do.

There are two things that need to happen to reduce communication problems. Number one is that the family member who may be talking to you needs to be sure that they get your attention

before they begin to talk. Not halfway through whatever they are saying, but before they begin to talk. Then once they get your attention; they can't walk away or turn away from you in the middle of it. They have to stay there so you can see them. And your part of this is that once someone gets your attention, you must pay attention to them.

Some people with hearing loss feel marginal, even in their own families. And I think that it happens like this: Let's say I am sitting at the breakfast table. I live with a couple of brothers and sisters, and we have breakfast every morning before we go to work, and then usually dinner at night. So one morning I am sitting at the table, and my brother says something to me, and I say, "Oh, gee, I wasn't looking at you when you said that. Would you do me a favor and repeat that?" He replies, "Oh, it wasn't important." Sound familiar? And the immediate feeling that this gives me is that I am not important enough to be included—that whatever it is is important enough for the rest of them to know, but not for me. Or my sister may say something, and again I ask for a repeat and she then says, "I will tell you later." Well, how is it that they can know it now but I have to wait until later? More important in both of these instances is who is my brother to decide what's important for me to know? I need to make those decisions, not other people. It's clear to me that I am marginal in this situation. There's them, and there's me. A little bit later I say something to my other brother, and he snaps at me: "Oh, never mind!" Again, the same problem. That evening I may be sitting in the living room reading a book, and the phone rings, and it's our cousin from Maine. And so my brother picks up the phone and says: "Chris, how are you? It's good to hear from you. Oh, you what? Oh, my god. Congratulations. When did what happen? That's wonderful." Then a couple of minutes later he is saying, she did what? Is she all right? In the hospital? How long?" And the conversation goes on for 20 minutes. And then my brother hangs up. And when I ask him: "What did Chris say?" He tells me everything is fine. So again I am marginal in this situation.

I think that the important point to remember here in of all of this is that nobody is out to get me. Nobody is mean. My family doesn't hate me. What is going on is that we're all taking the easy way out. That's what people do on planet earth. It is easier for them to tell me it isn't important or that they will tell me later than to repeat. It may be easier for me if I am told it isn't important. It may be easier for me to sulk and get my feelings hurt than to speak up on my own behalf. I have to be willing to rearrange things so it's a little more satisfying for me--rather than just dropping out. We have to stop letting this happen to us and correct it in a nice way. It doesn't do any good to jump down somebody's throat, because you just create another problem. But in a nice way you can explain to them what the meaning of this is to you when this happens so that you can feel like you are part of the family.

Bluffing is another issue for people who are hard of hearing as well as another complaint of family members. When we do this we get that dumb expression on our faces--like huh? When you live with people, you get to know them well. And they get to know you well, and the result is, if you bluff, you really won't get away with it. But the real problem with bluffing is that, like a lot of stuff we do to deal with our hearing problems, it has got a tremendous short-term payoff, but long-term pain. The payoff for me when I bluff is that I don't have to own up to the fact that I have a hearing loss. I don't have to be in the position of asking you to repeat, and then have someone tell me they are not going to do so. I can prevent a lot of those kinds of things. But I also just go on pretending to understand rather than understanding. The problems in the long run is that, if I stay in the conversation with you – for five minutes, you will find out that I have been bluffing, and you won't be happy with me at all.

When you bluff, people interpret it that you are not interested in what they're saying. And they get really upset. So I may lose friends or family that way. But even more important to me in the long run, is that when I bluff, I am copping out, and I know it. I am pretending something that isn't real. And I can get to the point that if I do this with some frequency, I don't trust myself anymore. Other people don't trust me either. So for those of us who have some difficulty with hearing, I think that it's up to us to be sure that we don't bluff.

This is very difficult to change because of the short-term payoffs. Short-term payoffs are difficult for all of us. Anybody who has tried to diet or quit smoking or quit drinking has the same problem. The short-term payoff--having that scotch and cigarette at that moment is wonderful. But long term down the road is not so wonderful. It's the same with bluffing.

Another thing we do is sometimes we dominate a conversation. It's a wonderful ploy because, as long as I am talking, I don't have to worry about not understanding you. It works effectively, except that you lose all your friends because nobody likes to be around somebody who talks all the time and never shuts up.

I would estimate that I have worked now with about 5,000 people who are in the same dilemma as people in this room. And I always hear the same stuff. It goes with the ballpark, and so does all of the depression, anxiety and anger that come with it. The dilemma for me as a psychologist is that the people in the mental health profession are largely not aware of this stuff. A lot of times we find that when someone goes to a counselor or a therapist and says they are having these problems at home because they don't hear well and are as a result depressed, the therapist will say they need to get to the real issue. Well, that is the real issue. But doctors don't understand that outside of Gallaudet and maybe one or two other places in the country.

How many people who have hearing problems in this country do anything about it? If the problem is severe enough, if you are deaf, you've got to do something about it, but the real problem is for people who have mild to moderate hearing loss who can get away with it a lot. So they don't do anything to deal with the problem. They kept kind of shoving it under the table. Those are the ones that really get into a lot of problem areas.

Question: I am a hearing person, and my husband is deaf and we sign. I don't feel that it is my responsibility to always be helping him understand everything because that makes my life a job. If I am talking to a friend on the phone, he wants to know everything that has been said and I don't think that's fair to me.

Sam Trychin: You are right. You are not a walking hearing aid. Some people I know worked out a problem on the telephone where, if the phone rang and it involved the person with the hearing loss, they would say: "Stay here with me and I will fill you in on what is happening." If it were not a call of that nature then they would say so. But even more to the point of what you are saying is that if a person can't use the phone, they can use a TTY. So one of the things that you don't want to be stuck with is being the telephone person for the hearing impaired person all the time. There are other options to that. But not to say that there won't be times when it is more convenient to do that. Do you understand what I am saying?

Questioner: Yes, I do. However, I disagree with a lot of the things that you are saying, like the family chitchat thing at the table. Sometimes it IS just nothing. And to stop to repeat all the

time something that is nothing--I think, personally, it's better to move forward. I tell my friends that it is better to invite us out and have my husband get maybe 30% of what's happening rather than us staying home and get zero percent of what's happening. I think it's up to him sometimes to accept that that he is not always going to understand and to be gracious to us as hearing people because that's the world that he is in.

Sam Trychin: You are talking about a slightly different issue than I was talking about. I was talking about someone who on occasion does not understand and needs somebody to repeat. So it's clear that you two need to work out some kind of a compromise. When we lived in San Diego we played cards with 12 people every Wednesday and Friday night. And if I thought I was going to follow everything that was going on everybody would have left quickly, including me. So there are some situations in which you just go and you get what you can get. Thanksgiving is coming up. We have a lot of folks in this room who probably feel anxious about that, right? A lot of people who have hearing difficulty hate family gatherings because of this issue. And a lot them say they see no reason to sit around the table with 10 or 12 people they don't understand. What I do is make appointments one on one with people and say: "Can we get together between 3:00 and 4:00?" And that works.

Questioner: Do you have suggestions about exactly what you would say if you are told it is not important and so forth?

Sam Trychin: Number one I would suggest that you talk to the people when it's not happening. Just say, "By the way, I want to tell you about my hearing stuff." And then tell them. Do this at a time when it's not a hot issue. What happens to us is we have a lot of anger because this stuff happens time and time again. People will forget. And forget, and forget. So we have to come up with some kind of a signal system. For example, if I am talking to someone who has for 50 years used a very low voice, I might say I need you to raise your voice because of my hearing loss. I need you to speak a little louder. And that will be good for like 15 seconds, or 30 seconds. This will work until the person gets interested in what they're saying again. And as soon as they're interested in what they are saying, they forget about how they're supposed to talk. What I need to do in a situation with that person is to say something like: "I need you to talk louder than you usually do, and I know you will forget because everybody forgets this stuff. When you start to drop your voice, is it okay if I touch my ear to remind you?" That way you can get them to change their communication behavior without having to verbally interrupt them.

As people who don't hear well, we often give people lousy signals and then we get angry with them. We say: "What I would like you to do is raise your voice." And the person begins shout at you and we don't need shouting. What has happened is we gave them a lousy signal. What we need to do is say to people something like: "I need you to raise your voice, and when it's right I will tell you." We need to give precise feedback at a time preferably when we are not hot and angry, because it is really hard to get something done with somebody when you are feeling that way. Think of a nice way of explaining it. Tell them there is nothing wrong with the way they talk, but that this is what you need. This takes the burden off of them instead of making them feel criticized.

Questioner: When I lost my hearing, my family lost my hearing, too. It was every bit as hard on them as it was on me. My wife and I used to sit around and chitchat. But when I became hard of hearing, and she had to repeat for me again and again, the frustration for her of repeating

changed that dynamic. It was no longer conversation for her. It was work. That seems to be the sticking point. This seems to be the issue that needs to be addressed. How do you change that so that it goes back to the way that it was before?

Sam Trychin: I don't know how much of that has to do with how frequently that you are asking for a repeat. Always keep it in mind that it's a two-way street, and that both sides are often contributing to problems, and both sides are necessary in contributing to solutions for the problems. It's a matter of sitting down and ironing it out and working with the other person. If it is one person particularly that you see with some frequency who does that, talk to them about it when you are not hot and angry. You want to do this in a way that will get you cooperation. The problem is you get hot and jump on people and you don't get cooperation, you get defensiveness. So you want to get your point across in a way that the other person will want to comply. What about using an assistive listening device to increase the amount that you are able to understand. If the other person has something about the way they talk that produces problems, can you get them to modify that so you'll understand better. Are you facing each other when you talk so that you can clearly see her face? Try to determine exactly what it is that contributes to misunderstanding or not understanding and change that.

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Dr. Trychin currently conducts training programs, classes, and workshops for people who are hard of hearing, their families, and professionals who provide services to them. His specialty is the application of psychological concepts, principles, and procedures to problems and issues related to hearing loss.

Dr. Trychin has written 15 books, authored numerous professional book chapters and journal articles, and produced a variety of videotapes related to coping with hearing loss. He has conducted hundreds of workshops and training programs across the United States and in Canada. He and his wife Janet, an audiologist, frequently conduct workshops together.

Dr. Trychin is a member of the American Psychological Association, is listed in the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, and is a licensed psychologist in Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia. He is also the Mental Health and Rehabilitation Advisor to Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc. (SHHH) and is a member of the State of Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Advisory Committee for Persons Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Dr. Trychin is hard of hearing himself and has been wearing hearing aids since 1953.

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