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## Tips for Travelers with Hearing Loss

Beth Wilson

Traveling can be a stressful event, and this is only more so for those of us with a hearing loss. Every airport, it seems, has a different system for moving their passengers from the airport door to the plane. The only thing that is consistent across all modes of travel is that the necessary instructions that are not permanent enough to warrant a sign are made over public address systems. Traveling is a challenge for people with hearing loss and this article describes some tips to eliminate a few of the barriers and make the experience more enjoyable.

My own travels have been diverse and frequent. International travel to countries where the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not apply are even more challenging. With each trip I enjoy the benefits of prior coping strategies and I discover new ones.

The first opportunity to make our trip easier presents itself in the preparation stages where we make the reservations and pack our suitcases. The focus in this article is primarily on air travel, but bus and train trips often present similar obstacles.

### **Preparing for the Trip**

Whether you are making your own reservations or using an agent, this is an important opportunity to identify your hearing loss. I notify the airline so that they can code the ticket. In some cases this allows earlier boarding, but this does not seem to be a consistent policy. Also, I notify the hotel that I will need their kit for people with hearing loss.

The ADA does not require that you notify a hotel in advance, but I find that sometimes it helps. Hotels are required to have such kits for 4% of their first 100 rooms. Unfortunately the kit is usually stashed away in an administrator's office, purchased and forgotten when the ADA requirement was first announced. Since Title III of the ADA relating to public accommodations went into effect January 26, 1992, many of the hotels I checked into for the first time undergo a major detective operation on their hands to find their kit. It is unlikely that the weary clerk you encounter at check-in, especially if you

are a late night arrival, has first hand knowledge of a kit that was purchased and hidden over a decade ago. If you make the request for the kit part of the reservation, it gives the hotel staff some time to find the kit and arrange for your television to have captioning.

If you are planning to take a shuttle to the hotel, sometimes it helps to contact the hotel and ask for specific instructions. Responses such as “pick up the courtesy phone” or “ask at the information booth” are inaccessible to many of us. Especially if you are making your own arrangements, your ability to communicate in quiet over your own amplified phone using a T-switch can be misinterpreted to think that you would be able to use a courtesy phone. I explain that an airport environment is too noisy for me to use a standard telephone to receive verbal instructions and ask for a detailed description of where the shuttle bus will be and what it looks like. I have even had a hotel fax or mail information to me so that I have a piece of paper to show an airport official when I get overwhelmed.

When I pack I put hearing aid batteries in every bag. I also bring a travel vibrating alarm clock because I cannot use a wake-up call service. Alarm clocks are included in the hotel kit, but I don't like to take chances. I also pack my FM equipment in my carry-on bag. For many of us with a hearing loss, our electronics are more important than our underwear. I can (and did) buy clothing on a trip when my bags took extra excursions, but I cannot replace my assistive equipment at the local store.

### **Navigating the Shuttle Bus**

It is probably a good thing that the driver is facing forward and looking at the road while operating the shuttle vehicle, but this makes it very difficult for those of us with hearing loss to hear the instructions given to the windshield for our benefit. The airport shuttle driver will call out airlines or parking stands and a courtesy van will announce potential hotels. Often if no one responds, they keep going.

Unless I am very familiar with the announcement habits of a particular shuttle, I tell the driver when I board that I am hard of hearing and cannot hear the announcements and then I provide my destination. I have also found it helpful to hand the driver a 3x5 card that states “Hard of Hearing” at the top with my airline or hotel name on the bottom. The hotel card also works well with taxi drivers that insist on asking you questions about your destination after you leave the taxi stand.

### **At the Airport**

Check-in is typically a noisy environment where agents are asking questions that are tedious and repetitious to them, but new and important to us. Some of the questions I circumvent with a pre-emptive strike by handing over my driver's license with my printed receipt of the ticket and announce how many bags I am checking. There are also questions that the agent must ask you for security. It is important to answer “have your bags been with you since you packed them” and “has anyone asked you to carry anything for you” correctly and guessing “yes” or “no” may not work. I play it safe by including the question in my answer, such as “Yes, my bags have been with me at all times” and “No, no one has approached me.” I also ask for any verbal information to be written down on the ticket folder, such as the gate or connection information.

The biggest improvement to my travel experience came when I started wearing a button that proclaims, “Face Me – I’m Hard of Hearing.” I discovered that many times the agent is talking to me while typing on a keyboard or looking at a screen and I have no idea that they have asked me a question. Before wearing the button I encountered irritated looks in response to my refusal to answer. With the button they look up to give me “the look” and discover the button. Now they smile and ask the questions directly to me.

Security is the next challenge. These people are looking for suspicious characters and unfortunately we look suspicious scanning the area for moving lips. I wear the button until the last moment and then put it in the tray or hook it to my bag. Security has become a real challenge more recently, so I pack my electronics in a clear bag and send that through separately. When you think about what an FM transmitter and receiver with its batteries and wires must look like going through the X-Ray machine, you understand why that bag always gets searched. If they can see it easily when brought out for closer inspection, it is easier. Friends have told me that they include product information for their assistive devices, especially remote controls for their hearing aids.

### **Renting a Car**

My experience has been that car rental agencies are located in the noisiest part of the airport and seem to be staffed by people with the quietest voices. I know that they want my name and driver’s license. I usually write down the reservation number on a piece of paper with my name on it and hand it over with my license and credit card. The “Face Me” button is essential because the agent will be asking questions and giving instructions while preparing my rental agreement.

The important thing to remember at this point is that most of the questions are phrased to cost you money if you just nod or say “okay.” They will ask if you want more insurance, a bigger car, to purchase a full tank of gas from them instead of paying for what you use, and other expensive questions if you don’t make sure you understand before you answer.

Once the rental agreement is complete and the agent is handing me keys, there seems to be an unnecessary rush to get me away from the counter with a flurry of verbal instructions about where to find the car and how to get to the main highway. I now ask the agent to write down the car type, color, and license number (or space number if that is the identifier) on the rental paperwork. I ask them to write directions and they usually grab a map to do that.

### **At the Hotel**

Again, the “Face Me” button has helped with this check-in process. Usually I am so anxious to drop my bags and get to the room that the temptation to grab the room key and run is strong. There are a few questions I stop to ask, though, either before leaving with the key or on a return visit to the desk shortly after settling in.

The first question is about how messages are received. Some hotels have a blinking light on the phone that will indicate that you have a message. More often now there is a voicemail system that you have to navigate instead of an operator reading you the message over the phone. Particularly in an area where I am struggling with accents, I have trouble with the voicemail systems and need to ask that my messages be written out

for me. I work this out with the front desk early in my stay whether I can retrieve my own messages, need to have them put under my door, or that I will come to the desk to collect written messages when I see the message light on.

The second question is about the kit for people with hearing loss. I have learned not to ask if they have a kit for me, because that implies that “sorry, no we don’t” is an acceptable answer. Now I phrase my request as a statement: “I need your kit for people with hearing loss.” I then breathe deeply and prepare for the “oh, we don’t have any of those” responses that I usually encounter on the first visit. I respond with confidence and have provided a cheat sheet to travel agents for such occasions when they request the kit as part of my reservation. I say, “I think you need to check with your administrative offices on this one. This is a federal law that went into effect in 1992 that requires that your hotel have such a kit for me.” I then suggest that it is probably hidden in someone’s office and offer to contact them in a few hours to check on their progress. If they cannot find one, I then suggest that they contact a nearby hotel, even a competitor, because all hotels are required to have these kits and I would feel obligated to report such a violation.

### **Being Creative**

Every trip I seem to encounter a new challenge, but international travel poses some additional barriers because the ADA has no influence outside of America. Overseas travel means that I have to bring my own equipment and plenty of batteries and/or adapters. I have to pay attention to the power that will be available in the country. Sometimes the adapter will change the voltage but not the current. I have cooked my rechargeable batteries a number of times and now take disposables instead.

Sometimes a little creativity is necessary, such as the time was traveling with co-workers in England. We all went to our rooms to rest for a while and the team leader arranged to call us when it was time to leave. When I walked into my room I realized that I wouldn’t hear the phone ring unless I stayed awake and kept my hearing aid on. I was desperate for a nap and jealous that my colleagues would be able to rest when I couldn’t. I found a tray that held a teapot, cups, and teabags (a British essential). I removed everything and placed the tray upside down with half of the tray under my pillow. I then placed the phone on the exposed side of the tray so that I would feel the vibration of the ringer and the ringing would be amplified into my pillow.

When there was no amplifier for my phone, I asked that messages be put under my door. One trip my suitcases were delayed and my vibrating alarm clock was in the suitcase (I have since learned to pack that in my carry-on bag). I asked for a duplicate key for my co-worker until my bags arrived. The arrangement we made was that I would not put the bolt over on my door until I woke up and was getting ready for breakfast. If I wasn’t in the hotel restaurant by the agreed upon time, she would use the key to come into my room and wake me up. If I was already up but not in the restaurant yet, she wouldn’t be able to get in because the bolt would be in the way.

Traveling does not have to be an insurmountable challenge with a hearing loss. The important thing is to not hide our hearing loss. I let the agents, hotel staff, and bus drivers know that I have a hearing loss. I wear a “Face Me” button everywhere. It is also important to speak up for your needs, being firm without being hostile, and look for ways

to be creative. Most importantly, a good sense of humor will increase the odds of having a good time.

### **Why Don't Cell Phones Work With Hearing Aids?**

*By Beth J. Wilson – Appears on “Best of Beyond Hearing”*

Cell phone compatibility with hearing aids is a VERY complex issue. The interference comes from many sources and you need both the cell phone and the hearing aid contributing to the solution.

Let me try to summarize the main points of the issue. The phone creates certain “electronic noise” from its battery, backlight, circuit operations, and the radio frequency (RF) energy. The cell phone cannot do much about the RF energy, because that is the point of the phone, however, the cell phone can be designed to reduce electromagnetic interference. The hearing aid amplifies any input to its microphone or telecoil, and CROS aids can often have antennas to pick up energy. Many of the hearing aids on the market have no noise immunity, and therefore amplify all noise presented to them. Some hearing aids on the market, such as the Siemens Signia BTE, have noise immunity designs built in. The hearing aid cannot do much about magnetic energy, because that is the whole point of the telecoil.

As noted, my hearing aid has excellent noise immunity. I no longer “hear” store alarms as I walk out or get interference from video screens and other sources of electronic noise I used to experience. I have tried many cell phones with my hearing aid that is immune to RF and electronic noise. I get no interference from CDMA or IDEN phones, generally. I cannot use TDMA or GSM phones.

The problem here is in the protocol of the wireless waveform. The TDMA system packs multiple users into the same frequency frame by assigning them slots in a timeframe. It is kind of like having seats in the same row at a theater. The problem is that the time sync signals and the all the waveform characteristics cause the battery to pulse and interfere with a hearing aid telecoil. Even with GOOD noise immunity, you will probably have problems with a TDMA or GSM phone.

In Australia, they require that any hearing aid paid for with government funds to have a telecoil and noise immunity (I'd like to get THAT plan implemented here!). The CDMA cell phones work with these hearing aids and the other phones do not. The wireless carriers offer attachments for the non-CDMA phone systems.

The answer may not just be going to CDMA, though, because the reason wireless carriers are moving toward GSM is that they can offer more features. AT&T is moving from TDMA to GSM (mLife commercials...) soon. The answer is getting both the hearing aids to have better noise immunity and the cell phones to work with hearing aids that have good noise immunity.

I am not a fan of attachments. If I had to get myself assembled by the third ring, I would have to practice that at home like it was an Olympic event. I don't mind attachments for an outgoing call but I do not consider them an option for an incoming call.

There are some phones that work with CDMA. The clam shell designs tend to work the best because you are away from the battery. Turning off the backlight usually helps, too. The Audex "insert" (it doesn't offend me like the attachments) works well for all protocols because it shields from the battery and other interference and enhances the magnetic signal. You pull off the battery and insert the Audex plate between the phone and the battery, so by my definition, it becomes an embedded solution.

### **Why Don't Cell Phones Work With Hearing Aids?**

*By Beth J. Wilson – Also appears on bhNEWS Digest Entry #8330 (5/19/02)*

I was 9 years old when Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. I'll save you the math, that means I'll turn 42 this year. My mother did not want us to interrupt this historic event, so she told us to stay quiet and gave us paper to write on if we had any questions. There was one small step for man and all that stuff and then my mother asked if we had any questions. I had one.

Now keep in mind that I did not have a hearing aid at this time. They had not come out CROS aids or digital aids yet, so there was nothing that would work for my loss yet. My question to my mother was this: "Is it easier to go to the moon than to make me a hearing aid?" Ugggh. This was not the first or the last difficult question that my mother would field from me.

Her answer, which I admire more every year, was "It is easier to make you a hearing aid, but the scientists that would do that kind of thing are more interested in the moon." I thought about that response and answered firmly, "then I'm going to become a scientist!" As most of you know, I did.

So years later when I was in college I returned home for a weekend visit. A friend of mine and I were getting together because, now stay with me here, her brother was taking my sister to the junior prom. Neither of them had a night license, so my friend and I had to drive them around to the dinner, the dance, the party, all that stuff. While we waited for our next chauffer assignment, we chatted about many things, including potential futures.

During one of our conversations she asked me why I picked engineering as a major. I told her the same story I just told you above. At that time engineers had crew cuts and pocket protectors, so she winced at what a challenge this would be, but displayed confidence in my ability to beat the odds of being a woman in a man's field and offered me encouragement.

Then I asked her what her plans were. Now let me explain that we knew each other from church play events. My friend Pam was either the lead actress, lead dancer, or the choreographer. (I played the accordion in the band.) I'm waiting to hear about dreams of Hollywood or plans for Broadway.

Imagine my surprise when she said "I'm going to be an astronaut." I looked at her with bewilderment and said "I think you need a plan B." She got VERY angry and recounted how supportive she had been of my plans and how dare I say that she couldn't be an

astronaut because she was a woman. "No, no, no, no, that's not it," I explained. "You're too short -- NASA has height requirements." Pam is shorter than me and not many adults are. "Oh that," she said calmly, "I'll make them change that." I chuckled at her confidence and said, "I hope you do!" and offered encouragement.

Now Pam and I lost touch over the years, but I did follow her career through the local Rochester NY paper that my mother would send me clippings from. I can tell you that I reflected many times on that conversation we had.

Especially in October 2000 when Pam piloted the shuttle.

I took time off from work to watch the streaming video each day from the NASA web site. Tears of pride and triumph rolled down my face as I saw her floating around the shuttle and heard her voice over the communications channel. She had dreamed of being an astronaut and there she was, despite the odds. I was so proud of her accomplishment. I was so happy that she had made her dream come true.

That Christmas my mother gave me a toy shuttle with little toy astronauts. I displayed it next to my computer at work at Raytheon and at SHHH and now by my computer at home. I look at it every day because it reminds me of what you can do when you dream big, and then go live your dreams.

My message to you is this: Visualize what can be, accept no limits, and then go make it happen. Dream big, and then go live your dreams.

Epilogue: There is a new IMAX film out (with rear window captioning) called the Space Station. In it there are astronauts from 3 shuttle flights, including Shuttle Pilot Pam Melroy on STS-92. Her flight was the one that installed the truss and she makes a short cameo appearance on the film. Everyone who works at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum now knows this because I stood right up in my seat when I saw her on the HUGE screen and shouted "That's Pam!!!!" I sat down, readjusted my RWC screen, and tried not to get thrown out during the rest of the movie.

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