

Rebellious Wellness^{over 50}

Living Skillfully with Hearing Loss — Beyond Hearing Aids



Episode 77: Living Skillfully with
Hearing Loss — Beyond Hearing Aids
with Gael Hannan & Shari Eberts

Gregory Anne: Welcome back everybody. Today we're having a conversation about hearing loss. My guests today are Gael Hannan and Shari Eberts.

They are both people who have hearing loss and are advocates for other people. Their mission is to help people understand what it's like to have that. So, family, friends of people with it, people who are going to experience it, experiencing it now, which maybe they're a little afraid to talk about it and get the help they need.

We're gonna cover all that and more. So welcome both of you. Thank you for being here.

Gael Hannan: It's an honor. Thank you for having us.

Gregory Anne: I know that I hear myself saying, Huh? What? To my husband more often than usual, I think, Oh gosh. All those years at Studio 54 with speakers, way too loud is catching up with me.

Either one of you, cuz you have different situations. You aren't losing your hearing because of aging, which is happening to many people, in their sixties, seventies. You both have different instances of hearing loss. So why don't you tell me, either one of you, your experience.

Gael Hannan: Well, I'll start cuz I'm older.

I have had hearing loss since birth, and it was cause unknown. And there's so many things that can be a cause like issues with pregnancy, issues at birth, but didn't discover it until I was two. So, my hearing loss was mild as a child. But it has been progressive, and I think there is also on top of whatever it is that caused my hearing loss, there is an element of age-related hearing loss as well.

I grew up didn't have a hearing aid until I was 20 because of the prevailing wisdom of the day. But once I got a hearing aid, things started to get better. But I still didn't know anything about hearing loss beyond my own.

I didn't know anyone else. I had no resources. School was challenging. And then later on when I was 40, I was expecting my baby and because I needed information on how not to harm my child because of hearing loss. I reached out to other people for the first time and it was with other people with hearing loss, and it was a Life changing experience.

And so my baby was okay cuz I knew what to do. And I knew better how to communicate, and I started to become an advocate and became a writer on hearing

loss issues. So that's sort of my journey. I have tinnitus as well, I have a cochlear implant. I can say I've been fully around the hearing loss block more than a few times.

Gregory Anne: Yeah, I guess. And I'm so glad you got the help you needed, first of all, and I have heard from other experts things you would think would be obvious. They often say find a group who has what you're going through or has suffered what you're about to go through as a support mechanism, even if you don't wanna reach out to the people you know and love.

There are online groups and specialized groups for almost everything in the world, right? But everybody says, What a difference in my life when I heard other people talking about the same thing. So what about you Sheri, you have a slightly different story.

Shari Eberts: Yeah, so my story is a little bit different. I first noticed my hearing loss in my mid-twenties when I was in graduate school, but my journey began many years before watching my father really struggle with his own hearing issues, and he was very, very stigmatized by it.

He would do almost anything to keep it secret. He even had his hair grown long over his ears. Well after that was no longer a fashionable thing to do. And I remember him at family parties. He would be sitting off by himself. And as a child, I kind of didn't understand why. I thought maybe he was shy.

But when I developed my own hearing loss, I finally understood that he was probably having trouble hearing in that difficult environment of the party, and he just was sort of exhausted and had given up and was just too tired to keep trying. So when I first discovered my hearing loss, I hid it.

I was following his footsteps. I felt embarrassed, ashamed. I don't know if it was coming from the societal stigmas about hearing loss or if it was really just something that I've learned watching my father, but this lasted for many, many years. You know, I was sort of in that denial phase, which many people with hearing loss are for a long period of time.

But then I had children of my own and everything really changed for me because I saw them watching me doing the same things I had watched my father do. I would

laugh at jokes I hadn't heard. I would retreat to the corner sometimes at a party, and I realized I was passing on the same stigma.

And I just knew it had to stop because my hearing loss is genetic. I worry maybe I would've passed it on to them. So I just changed everything and I started wearing my hearing aids all the time and teaching my friends how they could help me hear my best. It's not always easy, you know, but it's definitely worth it.

And then I found my way to advocacy as well. So now I'm an advocate for people with hearing loss. People like me. I write a weekly blog and produced a hearing loss documentary over the pandemic as well with some other advocates. And then of course, writing "Here and beyond, live skillfully with hearing loss" with Gael Hannan was a terrific experience in terms of advocacy, and I just hope that by sharing my story, I can help other people be more comfortable with their own hearing.

Gregory Anne: Yeah. You mentioned this stigma about hearing loss.

Talk a little bit about the stigma that you've experienced.

Gael Hannan: Stigma, there's different types of stigma. There's self stigma, society stigma. Our family has you know, these concepts, these myths, these false things that says that if you have hearing loss that you are somehow lesser than you are, somehow not as able as you used to be to do your job . Because we struggle.

So I think, sometimes historically the looks on our faces when we're trying to understand and we miss things, it's all the stigma. And that we sometimes are our own worst enemies in. The stigma is better than it used to be because of modern information, how we're able to share information and bring it out in the open .

At least 25% or more of the population has some degree of hearing loss. But this stigma can be debilitating and it can affect how we accept or not accept the fact that we have hearing loss and that we need to do something about it.

Gregory Anne: Sheri, did you wanna add anything?

Shari Eberts: Yeah, I think unfortunately still in society hearing loss is sort of the one disability where you can still kind of make fun of it. It's used in television programs to make somebody look foolish or out of it or stupid. And so if you sort

of see that coming at you as this stereotype and then you realize that you're having trouble hearing, you know, nobody wants to be the fool, right?

The brunt of the joke. So I think that it is challenging because we do bring some of it on ourselves, but I think mainstream media also sort of perpetuates that stigma a little bit more than you might see. You wouldn't see a blind person bumping into a chair as a joke.

Gregory Anne: Right, Right.

Shari Eberts: It's not funny. But a person with hearing loss responding inappropriately to a question, that's still funny. So I think that's part of what brings on it, it keeps perpetuating the stigma and like Gael said, hopefully it is getting better. And now with new over the counter hearing aids, I don't know if you've heard anything about that.

Gregory Anne: I just started, Yeah, I've just heard about.

Shari Eberts: Yeah, with more people sort of walking around with things in their ears to help them hear, hopefully that'll help bring some of that stigma down.

Gael Hannan: just want the hearing aid thing is very important because traditionally they were pretty big in beige.

I don't like beige and ugly and, but they were a label. So when someone saw a hearing aid on you and they made assumptions about, Oh, she doesn't hear, she's old, she's whatever. And you know, as Sherry said, people walking around now with all sorts of things in their ears talking to space, hard to get used to that.

Hearing aids have not yet achieved the cache that glasses are very nice glasses, They make us look pretty. Hearing aids don't quite yet make us look attractive. You don't think, Okay, what hearing aids am I gonna wear tonight? Most people don't. Those of us who have hearing loss in our community, we do bling them up and

Gregory Anne: Oh, wow.

Gael Hannan: Yeah. Yeah.

Gregory Anne: Hearing aid bling. I love it. I was going to bring up hearing aids because that is, something I've heard about from my elders. You know, they're too loud, they're too quiet. It's tinny. And I know you have an app I want you to talk about for the sound in an environment, an outdoor environment or restaurant type of thing.

But I know that that's a problem. The old ones maybe not so much the new ones having, you know, just not being able to get the register perfect for. Moving about your day. It's like it's one volume when you're talking to three people and it's another volume when you leave the house and they're not comfortable and they're ugly and they're wicked expensive.

I don't know about these new over the counter ones, what the price is, but I know that for so many people they become unaffordable. A senior citizen living on their senior pension or whatever it is. Have they changed that mess of sound? Is it better?

Shari Eberts: Well, hearing aids have definitely gotten better.

You know, technology has been incredible in its advancement, but hearing aids still are not like glasses. You know, I think people expect you put your hearing aids on and then you can hear normally. Like when you put your glasses on and your vision kind of sharpens pretty much back to how you would like to be seeing things, and for better or for worse, you know, it's just not like that.

With hearing aids, they definitely make things louder. They enhance different sounds to make speech easier to comprehend, especially in a quiet environment, but they don't restore your hearing back to normal. And the other things that hearing aids are not good at doing is distinguishing among sounds, so they're not mind readers, right?

So they don't know that I'm in this loud restaurant. They don't know I just wanna hear the person across from me. I don't wanna hear the people at the table over here or the clanking of the dishes. So there definitely are other things you need to do, and that's really one of the reasons that we wrote this book, is because people sort of think, Oh, I'm just gonna get hearing aids and you know, that's all I need to do.

And that's part of what you need to do but there are other pieces of it. We sort of talk about this three legged stool where technology is one of the legs, but there's

also an important piece of attitude. Having a a can-do attitude as well as using non-technology skills like communication, best practices, and behavioral change.

So it's definitely more than just the hearing aid

Gregory Anne: . Now, how does signing fit in for people? is that one of the skills that people should learn? Is that just for people that are really going to go deaf and not have any hearing at all?

Gael Hannan: That the level of hearing, So there's, there was a lot in there.

I am deaf, so essentially without my devices, I'm deaf, but with my devices I can hear us. So that tells you right there, there's deaf and there's deaf. Signing is a language. And Sherry and I use Spoken language and those people who are in deaf culture and have brought up to sign and learning sign, that is their language.

Most people with some degree of hearing loss or deafness. We do not sign. 99% of us do not an accurate figure, but pretty close to it. Most of us do not, and that's actually one of the stigmas, actually one of the things that we've had to deal with. People for going to conferences or different areas or we need some accommodation, they go, Well, I'll get you a sign language interpreter. Well that would be just groovy, if I understood sign language what we need is visual text. We need text interpretation, so for Sherry and I, signing is beautiful and I know a little bit, but it's not my language. It's not my community.

Gregory Anne: That's a great distinction. I appreciate that.

Shari Eberts: And I think it's hard, you know, people assume a lot of times that people with hearing loss can sign, right?

Like Gael said, if you're in the hospital and you ask for an accommodation, they send you a sign language interpreter, and that's not really going to help. But it is a beautiful story and an important story to tell. But I think the hearing loss story is also an important story.

Gregory Anne: Absolutely. Yeah. And I, I think that having the two of you with different entry points into this story of hearing loss is also important for the broader population to hear.

And when you say it's genetic, it was interesting, your children in both cases were the catalyst for you both to get the help you needed so that you could provide for them differently.

Gael Hannan: And you know, your point was interesting. Regardless of like, Sherry and I have different levels of hearing loss or different types of devices, causes are different, but there's so much of our hearing loss journey that is the same. So whether you have moderate hearing loss or severe hearing loss, there are still these strategies that you need to use.

Bottom line is you need to not just hear, but you need to understand. And Sheri and I, when we were starting up our process of writing the book, we were doing a lot of talking and we realized that we both came to a real life changing aha moment when in our own way, at our own time, we realized that our goal shouldn't be just to hear better.

But to communicate better, I will never hear better. I mean different, better hearing aids help improve it, but I will never hear well but I can communicate better. And I would tell you, I communicate now in my sixties, probably better than I did in my thirties, because I know how to advocate for myself.

There's no shame in my hearing loss. I know what I need people to do so that I can see them and understand. So our journeys are different yet they're they're the same in so many ways.

Gregory Anne: Yeah. Yeah.

Shari Eberts: And that was one of the, sort of the miracle things that happened when we first started writing the book is that we realized that independently we had come to use many of the same skills and strategies.

And when we realized that, we kinda said, Okay, we're onto something here. We should really put everything that we know into this book and there really was so much overlap there that we knew that we had a good formula to share with other people.

Gregory Anne: Can you give me one of the strategies?

Shari Eberts: Sure there are so many

Gregory Anne: Just give us a couple so that people understand what strategy in your world is.

Shari Eberts: Well, so we have sort of those three legs of the stool, right? So I'll talk about one that's in the communication game changers. So those are the non-technical skills, the sort of the behavioral changes. So self-identifying as somebody with hearing loss.

Knowing how to have sort of that script and let people know that you have hearing loss, but not just let them know that, ask them what you need from them. And how they can help you in terms of communicating better. So maybe that's moving to another part of the restaurant. Maybe that's asking and letting them know they need to face you so that you can see their mouth and their face for speech reading.

So it's a skill to do that. It takes a little bit of bravery. You have to sort of build your confidence. I always say practice on strangers on the bus. Let your seat mate know like, Oh, I have hearing loss in case there's an important announcement. Would you please let me know?

And maybe you stumble over your words, but the next time it's a little bit better and a little bit better. So it's definitely a skill that you get better at with practice.

Gael Hannan: I always laugh at the image of Sheri on the bus going, Hi, I'm hearing loss. . Another area of, another leg of the stool is what we call mind shifts, and it's changing how we look at our hearing loss.

It we operate, we talked about stigma, but we operate under so many negative attitudes. Why me? No one understands what I'm going through. No one else is going through, my family don't accommodate me. All of these things, and it perpetuates this sense of isolation and frustration. And so in our mind shifts, we take an attitude and we try to shift to a more actionable way of looking at your hearing loss.

So when you do that, when you look at your hearing loss in another way, how you cope with it changes. It doesn't change your hearing loss. Your hearing losses is still as severe, but how you deal with it and just for example, no one knows what I'm going through. I'm going through this on my own. Both of us

when we realized that I'm not alone and I'm other people understand me, oh my gosh. It was like a life preserver. So there's a whole section of the book on this.

And it's kind of fundamental. In some ways it's almost the most important because it will help your hearing aid work better, it will help your interaction when you have a more positive attitude about your hearing loss.

Gregory Anne: Yeah. I just realized that if you don't communicate, then the people around you don't know. Then they might think, like you said, that there's something else going on. Not a negative kind of going on, but you know that maybe you are confused by, maybe you have an illness .

So I think this is really great for the, like you said, friends and family as well as for you to have success in life and sort of get through life in a positive way. It.

Gael Hannan: We also have a very, very bad habit, both of us with hearing loss and a lot of hearing people too. And it's bluffing and it's pretending we understand.

When sometimes we don't have a clue, and sometimes you've had hearing loss for a while, you've become very adept at how to do it. I am a very skilled bluffer. Although we don't always, people sometimes clue in more than we think they do, but this is a very negative strategy, if you wanna call it that.

And it's very hard to stop doing because conversations can get away from us so easily. And it's very exhausting to try and focus and keep up. So bluffing is something we also talk about a lot because with other attitudes in place, we can bluff less and have better conversations.

Gregory Anne: Yeah. Yeah. And what is life without a conversation?

Shari Eberts: Absolutely. That's what it's all about. It's the relationships, and that's where hearing loss really takes its biggest toll, right? Because in order to have a relationship with someone, in order to have feelings and enjoy moments and laughter, you need to be able to communicate. Hearing loss makes it harder to communicate.

And that's why we really encourage people to do whatever you need to do in order to get that done. And part of it's the attitude, part of it's the technology and part of

it are these behavioral changes. And together, you really can shift your focus, not worrying about hearing everything like Gael said

but worrying about the communication and that's what it's all about.

Gregory Anne: This is like self-love on steroids. learning to love yourself enough to let people know what you need. To ask them to tune into how you want them to face you or speak maybe more slowly or in a smaller group. Et cetera, because it's hard enough for women to ask for help in general.

Right? Raise the kids, do all the other stuff we do, and just get through it. And so then when you add this layer of ask, that seems to me like a very big personal development course for your life.

Gael Hannan: We talk a lot about self, Sorry, Sherry, about self-compassion. Yeah, self-compassion. And it's a very important.

Self care and not being hard on ourselves when we don't hear things or conversation goes out of the, that's a really important thing. Also something we talk about in the book to, to be our healthiest people that we can be to cope with the communication challenges that we face every day.

Gregory Anne: So tell me, tell the listeners, are there communities that you speak for that you recommend to people, places for them to go, to sort of dip their toe in and start getting help?

Shari Eberts: Absolutely. And, and for both Gael and I, finding those peers. And you had mentioned you know, earlier about finding other people that are experiencing the same thing.

It can be so life changing and so there's lots of ways to connect with other people with hearing loss. I mean, we always sort of complain about social media. But actually things like Facebook, Facebook groups are a really good way to sort of stick a toe in. If you're just trying to learn about it and start to connect with people with hearing loss, that's a great way to do it.

There are lots of different Facebook groups. I have one that's called Living With Hearing Loss. There's another really good one called the Emotional Side of Hearing Loss, and there's one that's run by Hearing Loss Association of America.

Which is the largest consumer oriented group in the US that represents the needs of people with hearing loss.

So that's a good place to start. Some of those Facebook groups and just, and you can watch and listen and take some things with the grain of salt, right? Because it is on, you know, social media. But just find the people that are, are, you know, being vulnerable and sharing themselves and sharing tips, and it's a, it's a good way to start.

Gregory Anne: Gael did you wanna add anything?

Gael Hannan: No, I think that's great. In Canada we have the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, although it's not as large as HLAA the American group that Sheri mentioned. But in many countries around the world, they do have consumer groups. But online resources are a wonderful way as Sheri said.

Grain of salt sometimes, because sometimes people need to vent about their hearing aid or nobody's doing anything to help us. They just wanna make money off our backs and all of these things. So people need a place to vent.

Shari Eberts: I would just say if people are feeling a little braver too, they do at H L A A. have chapters across the country where you can go and meet with other people in person. You know, once you've stuck your toe in, maybe you wanna like stick your leg in . That's something I I definitely recommend. As well as annual conventions. That was the first time that I learned and Gael too, at a chalk convention in Canada, about some of the external accommodations that work for people with hearing loss. So things called like cart, which is where somebody types and you get a transcript of what's being said. Which is so helpful for people with hearing loss and things like hearing loops.

So there's different ways to sort of get involved in the group.

Gregory Anne: That's great. And the documentary, film, tell me a little bit about that.

Shari Eberts: So, during the pandemic everyone was isolated but people with hearing loss felt maybe even more isolated because of the masks and the communication was just almost impossible. It was terrifying to sort of go out in public.

Gregory Anne: My God, I hadn't thought of that.

Shari Eberts: Yeah, right. You just have no confidence that you're gonna be able to communicate well with people.

So we started doing some of these virtual meetings. We got people together online, and I and a couple of other advocates, we would have 700 people dial into these meetings and we realized the power of community and the power of storytelling. And that really inspired us to try and put it down into something a little bit more permanent, like this documentary to share that hearing loss story.

Hopefully to build that community of people who need that, but also to show that hearing loss experience, not the deaf experience, but the hearing loss, experience more widely to mainstream audiences. To educate and to just build some empathy for that type of experience. So it's been a tremendous opportunity for us to create that.

And it's available. You can learn more about it on their website, which is we dash hear you.com, and it's available to rent or to purchase on Vimeo on demand. Perfect.

Gregory Anne: and what haven't we covered that you want to bring up for the listeners?

Gael Hannan: Oh gosh. You give us eight hours. We could just keep talking, but if I could just tell your listeners one thing, that if you suspect a hearing loss, see someone about it because a hearing loss can really impact so many areas of your life without you realizing it. So if you suspect that you have a hearing loss, just toddle on down to the hearing clinic or speak to your family doctor about it because it's so important. And we really learned from experience that the more help you get, the better quality of life you're gonna have.

Gregory Anne: Yeah. Makes sense. What about tinnitus? Oh, sorry, go ahead. We'll go back to tinnitus. Go ahead.

Shari Eberts: I was just gonna say hearing loss is also associated with other health issues. So people with hearing loss are twice as likely to have issues with falling. They have higher incidences of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and in a scary

way, there's research that shows untreated hearing loss is associated with higher risk of developing dementia as well.

So there are very important social and psychological reasons to treat your hearing loss, but they're also very important, just physical reasons to take care of it. It impacts every aspect of your life.

Gregory Anne: Yeah. I had no idea about the correlation or the relationship to the lifestyle diseases. But I do know that it contributes to isolation when especially in older people who may just have their spouse, partner and or no one else living with them. Like your dad started hanging out in the corner at a party. They just hang out alone at home and then they have no input and nothing to engage them. And that definitely leads to depression, not to mention other things.

So tinnitus, you mentioned tinnitus on your website. What is the relationship to hearing? Or do they go hand in hand?

Gael Hannan: Not necessarily. There's many people who have tinnitus who don't have hearing loss, and there are many of us who, with hearing loss who have tinnitus.

Sherry and I both have tinnitus. I unfortunately just developed mine a few years ago, and I have a, particularly vicious brand. Like right now as I'm talking to you it's like I'm in an airline hanger. Tinnitus is quite prevalent in our society for many reasons, but there are many, many, many things that can cause tinnitus.

And the other thing is people say, Well, there's nothing you can do about it. There is no pill that you can take to cure it. But there are a lot of behavior cognitive behavior things exercise, mindfulness reducing stress. Quite often stress itself will cause it.

So it is a challenge. For me, it's far more challenging than my hearing loss, but they are making progress with research. Some people just have a little dingy bell and others have an orchestra played very badly, such as I do.

Sheri, you've got a, a screech don't you?

Shari Eberts: Mine's like a fluorescent light bulb. So you know when a fluorescent bulb comes on and you hear that and then it builds and then it sort of,

That's mine. and so I can always feel it. I can almost feel it coming on. And then we get the fluorescent light bulb. And then what I try and do sometimes is focus on it.

And then it recedes, but that doesn't work for everyone. I also find that meditation really is very helpful for me because I think it gets to a lot of the things that Gael was saying, Right? It lowers my stress, it gives me coping skills. We can't make the tinnitus go away,

but we can change the way that it impacts us, and the force that we give it in our life. But it can be worse than the hearing loss because it's so hard to relate to. This thing that is out of your control, which is very frustrating.

Gregory Anne: I've had it on and off, just a transient episode of it, and I find it hard to think of anything else when it's happening to be honest.

Gael Hannan: So again, if someone has tinnitus just don't think there's nothing I can do about it. Have talk to your doctor, have a hearing test, because sometimes, quite often there is a correlation. But there's just so many things that can cause it and some things are fixable.

Gregory Anne: Yeah, exactly. So before we go, the book is here, h e a r and beyond. Yes. And you can buy it on all of the websites, book websites, including IndieBound. What I'm taking away from this different for everybody, but what I'm hearing is this empathy, openness to have this conversation and then the empathy for something that most of us don't know anything about. Many of us, not most. But rather than, as you we talked about earlier, rather than think, Oh, that person can't hear what's wrong with them .

It's like you could miss a thing, like you could get your finger chopped off, right? I was a chef. Lots of people lost lots of things over 30 years. It's no different. But you can see that, we can't see how you guys are having to do all this extra work to interpret the world so that you can enjoy it. So I would like to just bring some empathy to the end of this conversation.

Maybe somebody in your family who is experiencing hearing loss?

But anyway, great conversation. Anything you wanna leave the listeners with?

Shari Eberts: I would just say that the, If you wanna learn more about the book, you can go to Hear and and beyond.com.

Gregory Anne: Okay. Great. Great

Gael Hannan: it's been a great conversation. Thank you so much. Thank you for your empathetic approach to, and I'm, I'm, sounds like you learned a couple of things and which is wonderful that's our goal. Oh, absolutely. Raise awareness.

Gregory Anne: I, I always learn from these conversations. There is not a person that I've interviewed, even if I figured like, eh, health and wellness, Yeah, that's my gig. I always learn from people because again, it's the story. There's so much in the story that gives to us on another level than just being educated about something.

And that's what I love about these conversations. So thank you both very much, Sherry and Gael. I appreciate your time, your openness and willingness to bring this conversation to a bigger public audience. So thank you and be well.

Shari Eberts: Thank you.

Gael Hannan: Thank you.

Gregory Anne: You're welcome.

Next week peeps will be back with another episode.

Be well till then.