

My Mid-Career Hearing Loss (or, Mistakes I Made)

By Katherine Bouton



The vast majority of people with hearing loss in the workplace didn't start out that way. Their hearing loss probably came on gradually over a period of time, the result of noise exposure or aging. It can take a while before you are aware of a problem, and even longer before you can accept it. The timing of disclosure is affected by your psychological journey to acceptance of the loss. That journey can take a long time. On average, people wait seven to 10 years between first noticing a hearing loss and deciding to accept it and purchase hearing aids.

I discovered my initial hearing loss when I was 30, in 1978. But for the first decade after, I ignored it. I was working as a freelance magazine writer, so I wasn't at meetings or even talking much to people. In 1988, I started working for The New York Times Magazine as an editor. Back then, I literally danced around my hearing loss, keeping people on my right, my good ear.

Fast-forward to August 2001, when I turned 54. The next month, 9/11 happened. The world as we knew it changed forever. After months of intense work I developed flu-like symptoms, a ringing in my ears, dizziness, and nausea. I also was not hearing as well as I had been. The ENT ordered an MRI, tests for autoimmune disorders, the whole workup. He prescribed two weeks of high-dose steroids and recommended hearing aids—for both ears. The loss had progressed in my left ear, and I now also had moderate to severe loss in my right ear. Hearing aids were no longer an option; they were a necessity.

I remember the embarrassment and trepidation I felt when I told my boss about my hearing loss and new hearing aids. I told him the truth, that I had an unexplained but serious loss. A few years later, when he left the magazine, a colleague and I were candidates to replace him, but the other person got the job. When I realized I'd never actually been in the running, I felt demoralized and humiliated.

Was it my hearing loss? I knew it had affected my ability to jump into discussions. I sometimes couldn't follow what was said and often was reluctant to speak up because I wasn't sure what others had said. But more importantly—and it took years to realize this—I was working so hard to follow conversations and meetings that I didn't have the mental energy left over for proposing


creative projects. I was suffering from an overwhelming case of what neuroscientists call “cognitive load.”

In 2007, the Times moved to an open-plan, glass-and-steel tower. The acoustics were terrible, in the lobby, cafeteria, conference rooms—even the elevators seemed to resonate. By now, hearing loss was an undeniable presence in my daily life. As my confidence plummeted, my hearing loss grew worse. Or was it the other way around? I stayed at the magazine in a more executive oversight role, but I needed my hearing for all of the meetings. As the parameters of the job became clear—as the necessity to hear well became more a part of my work—I should have gone to management, explained my hearing loss fully and frankly, and asked them to find me a job that better suited my hearing abilities.

In October 2008, after another period of immense stress, I got sick. The buzzing in my ears was so loud the ENT had to type questions on his computer for me to read. Eventually I was ready to get a cochlear implant. An implant is pretty hard to hide—but still I tried, yanking my hair over my ears, wearing scarves.

When a company-wide buyout offer was in effect, I needed a sense of my new boss's plans. He responded with such venom about moving me out of the department that I reeled out of his office in shock. By the end of the year, my two decades at the Times were unceremoniously over.

The answer is full disclosure. Do everything you can to keep that job. Ask (or if needed, demand) the accommodations due you under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Keep a record of denied or ignored requests. Report incidents of unintentional discrimination. Keep the union rep informed, if you have one.

My mistakes were understandable, but that doesn't mean they weren't mistakes. Hopefully, you can learn something from them.  *Excerpted with permission from “Living Better With Hearing Loss” by Katherine Bouton (Workman, 2015). For more, see katherinebouton.com.*

SHARE YOUR STORY:

How have you handled (or not) your hearing loss at work? Tell us at editor@hearinghealthmag.com.



SUPPORT A CURE: HHF.ORG/DONATE