

Does hearing loss cause dementia?

By Debbie Selsavage, CDP

One of my pet peeves is when hearing aid manufacturers suggest that hearing loss causes dementia, or that caring for one's hearing can ward off dementia. These companies use very careful wording in their advertising to avoid outright falsehood, and often they create a veneer of scientific authority by referring to a body of research that seems to validate their claims.

I especially object to this kind of marketing because I believe their motive is to unnecessarily stoke fear among seniors through use of the dreaded "D" word. No doubt, they are familiar with the study by the American Association of Retired Persons that showed that among seniors, dementia is our most feared medical condition; feared by a majority of respondents above cancer, heart attack, and stroke!

In claiming that hearing loss can result in dementia, hearing aid companies often use arguments that narrowly define dementia as "cognitive decline." Cognition is the mental process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses. However, reduced cognition is only one part of the medically recognized definition of dementia, which also includes many other mental, physical, and emotional changes, plus loss of memory.

There is no doubt that hearing loss contributes to cognitive decline. If complete and accurate information is not coming into our brain through our ears, cognition will be adversely affected. But this does not mean that reduced cognition alone is equivalent to dementia. And dementia may include hearing loss as one of its a wide range of symptoms, but this does not mean that hearing loss causes dementia. Dementia involves a physical degradation of brain at the cellular level. Hearing loss does not result in destruction of our brain.

The foregoing may seem like a lot of academic hair-splitting over terminology, but these distinctions are important. By narrowing the definition of dementia, and subliminally linking terms like "cognition" and "dementia" as equivalent conditions, hearing aid manufacturers deliberately tap into our society-wide fear of dementia to sell their products and services.

In my opinion, this marketing approach is so unnecessary. Hearing loss in its own right is a terrible and dangerous condition, often leading to a poor

quality of life. This should be addressed as soon as it is detected by contacting a qualified audiologist. But I think we should address this important medical condition on its legitimate merits, and not unnecessarily stoke fear by suggesting it is equal to dementia or will lead to dementia.

I usually end my columns with my favorite slogan, "We all deserve the best," and, in my opinion, deserving the best in this difficult journey of dementia should not include incomplete, misleading, or inaccurate information that suggests that hearing aids can ward off dementia. Promoting products, services, and faux-medications under the claim that they can reduce, avoid, or cure dementia – when it is not true – is cynical, cruel, and deceptive. Our senior years are already tough enough without becoming the target of industries that promote fear for profit. We all deserve better!

Debbie Selsavage is a Certified Trainer and Consultant in the Positive Approach to Care®, and a Certified Dementia Practitioner. Her company, Coping with Dementia LLC, is dedicated to making life better for individuals living with dementia. Contact Debbie at deb@coping.today to learn about free support groups on line.