



Caring and Counseling

As audiology continues to evolve as an autonomous profession, the role the audiologist plays in counseling must evolve as well. In the early days of our profession, counseling and aural rehabilitation were major components of day-to-day practice. Over the years, as audiology became more diagnostic-, treatment- and technology-oriented, we matured and learned more than was ever imagined about audition.¹ Along the way, though, it seems we have lost our focus on counseling and have become dependent on diagnostics, treatment and technology as our driving force. We may engage in information counseling,² but it often is one-way communication based on content.

Counseling is of particular concern when it comes to working with families who are learning for the first time that their child has a hearing loss. Most parents who have a child born deaf or hard of hearing have normal hearing themselves. They have no knowledge of hearing loss or deafness; they have no idea what to do first, what to ask or how to go about taking care of a child with such challenges. The audiologist is the professional who must “break bad news,” and the initial reactions from the parents are almost assuredly very emotional.³

How we, as audiologists, respond to this situation is critical in the processing of parents’ grief. However, we may be under time constraints, uncomfortable with the outpouring of parent emotions and/or ill-prepared to move them forward. The likely step taken by audiologists is to give the parents an “information overload,” providing them with test results and recommendations. While this information is very important, we first should become an active listener and allow the parents to express and process their grief. Audiologists are prepared to discuss technology solutions and management strategies immediately with the family, but the family is not ready for that discussion until they deal with the fact that their child does not have normal hearing.

How do we help? It is important that we give parents the opportunity to ask questions, express concerns, bring up their own issues, and allow them to grieve. Grief is a process, and moving forward through the stages of grief is key to parents being able to embrace their child’s hearing loss and move forward in life. The seven stages of grief take the following path when parents learn about a child’s hearing loss:

Shock: Parents feel stunned and even numb to hear the news;

Denial: “This can’t be happening to us. This news just cannot be true. Not my child;”

Pain: Understanding that the diagnosis is real usually induces a great deal of pain and anguish;

Anger: Eventually, parents are mad and may engage in “blaming” God, their own parents, genetics, or each other;

Depression: As reality sets in, parents feel bad about the news but in a strange way. Depression actually is a turning point for parents to accept the news;

Acceptance: Finally, parents “get it” and embrace what is and begin to want to know what to do to address it; and

Advocacy: In order for the family to be successful in managing a child with hearing loss, family members have to move beyond acceptance and go into the world to chart a course for their child to have the best life possible.

These stages are very real to parents. It is our responsibility as audiologists to work with them to identify their feelings and develop strategies for moving through the grief process. This process is not always sequential and is situational. Parents need to understand that grief is present throughout one’s life, and there will be further grief when new circumstances occur, such as when the child starts kindergarten, enters middle school, begins high school, goes to college, gets married, gets a job, and so forth.

If audiologists are not prepared or comfortable with the task of counseling, they must either find the training to develop these skills or find other resources to make sure families get what they need. It is also important to recognize that the counseling described here in this article is in no way a substitute for mental health counseling, and we should recognize when parents need to seek help from professional counseling services. **\$**

REFERENCES

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3. Clark, JG and English, K. (2004). *Counseling in Audiologic Practice*. Allen and Bacon.

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