

An Examination of Social Isolation and Loneliness in Adults with Hearing Loss

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Abstract : Background: Social isolation (SI) is a major consequence of hearing loss (HL). Isolation can lead to serious health problems (e.g., dementia and depression). Hearing Aids (HA) is the primary intervention for HL. However, these are less effective in social situations. Interventions are needed for SI in adults with hearing loss (AHL). Objectives: Investigated the relationship between HL and SI. Explored the views of AHL and hearing healthcare professionals (HHP) towards interventions for isolation. Methods: Individual and group semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted at the Nottingham Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Biomedical Research Centre (BRC). Six AHL and seven HHP were recruited via maximum variation sampling. The interview transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Results: Social impacts of HL: Most participants described that HL hurt them. This was in the form of social withdrawal, strain on relationships, and identity loss. Downstream effects of HL: Most audiologists acknowledged that isolation from HL could lead to depression. HL can also lead to exhaustion and unemployment. Impact of stigma: There are negative connotations around HL and HA (e.g. old age) and there is difficulty talking about isolation. The complexity of SI: There can be difficulty separating SI due to HL from SI due to other contributing factors (e.g. comorbidities). Potential intervention for isolation: Participants were unfamiliar with interventions for isolation and few, if any, were targeted for AHL specifically. Most participants thought an intervention should be patient-centered and run by an AHL in the community. Opinions differed regarding whether it should hear specific or generic. Implementation of intervention: Challenges to the implementation of an intervention for SI exist due to the sensitivity of the subject. Conclusions: This study demonstrated that SI is a major consequence of HL and uncovered novel findings related to its interventions. Uptake of interventions offered to AHL to reduce loneliness and social isolation is expected to be better if led by AHL in the community as opposed to HHP led interventions in the hospital or clinic settings.

Keywords : adults with hearing loss, hearing aids, interventions, social isolation

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