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TAKE ACTION; Turn Up Treatment For Hearing Loss

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As people age, hearing loss becomes more common. Some might feel embarrassed by their hearing loss and try to hide it. But there's no hiding in the workplace; people know when someone can't hear.

For years, studies have linked untreated hearing loss to depression, anxiety and social self-isolation.

It also can cost cash. According to a study by the **Better Hearing Institute**, an Alexandria, Va.-based research group, untreated hearing loss can drag down household income by up to \$23,000 a year.

The institute, which surveyed 80,000 people, says people can stop that decline by getting hearing aids.

"Two-thirds of people with hearing loss are under retirement age," said **Sergei Kochkin**, a psychologist and executive director of the **Better Hearing Institute**. "This means they're in the workplace."

He and Gyl Kasewurm, an audiologist at Professional Hearing Services in St. Joseph, Mich., share tips on how to handle hearing loss at work.

**** Acknowledge the condition.** Many people with hearing loss are in denial and say, "I hear fine. I just can't hear high frequency sounds."

But Kasewurm said: "High frequency loss is the way hearing loss begins. You hear the sounds that make words loud, but you miss the consonants that make words clear. You misunderstand what people say, which can be devastating in the workplace."

One of her patients is an executive in his late 50 s who runs a global company with 20,000 employees.

"After treatment, he came back and told me that hearing aids changed his life," Kasewurm said.

The impact can be a surprise. Hearing loss happens so gradually, people often don't realize what they've been missing until they try hearing aids. Thirty-one million Americans suffer some hearing loss, and 95% of them can be treated with hearing aids.

Yet less than a quarter seek treatment.

Today's newest hearing aids are made of clear plastic. Many are so small, they're barely visible.

**** Repair your reputation.** People who are used to doing well at work may not understand why they're suddenly passed over for promotions. They mistakenly think that hiding their hearing loss will help them get ahead.

"When you don't hear, you can't communicate effectively, and people think your mental acuity is not good," Kochkin said. "Your boss might (incorrectly) think you're not as sharp as you really are."

He suggests that you rebuild your standing by communicating better, starting now.

"Get over your fear that people will discriminate against you because you wear a hearing aid," Kochkin said. "The reality is that people already discriminate against you because they think you're not very sharp."

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that companies provide you with phone devices that aid your hearing.

**** Be direct and honest.** "You could say, "You may have noticed I had hearing loss and haven't always responded well, but I decided to take action and have been fitted with a wonderful new hearing aid,"" Kasewurm said.