(Many thanks to UNC Hospice for permission to adapt this article for our newsletter and volunteers.)

Many of the patients served by Duke Hospice are—in addition to their other problems—hard of hearing. Indeed, many of our volunteers may be hard of hearing too. Impaired hearing becomes increasingly common after age 50: affecting as many as 30% of people aged 65 to 74 and 47% of those over 75 (1).

Consider the following strategies if you and/or your patient are hard of hearing (2):

**Gain attention:**
Before you begin speaking, make sure have the listener’s attention. Make eye contact and face the listener, if possible at the same level. You may call her name or gently touch her hand or arm. This will prepare the listener for your message and make it easier to hear the first part of your conversation.

**Maintain eye contact:**
Non-verbal communication is as or more important than the words you speak. Your facial expressions and body language add vital information. Most people use lip-reading on some level. By lip-reading, you can understand some sounds that are more difficult to hear. (This is the origin of the remark, I can’t hear you until I put my glasses on.)

**Lighting:**
Speak directly face-to-face where diffuse lighting is adequate and lights the speaker’s face. This allows the listener to observe the speaker’s facial expression as well as lip movements. Change position so that you are not standing in front of a light source such as a window, which puts your face in shadow or silhouette and makes it difficult for the hard-of-hearing person to lip-read.

**Reduce background noise:**
When talking with patients and families, reduce background noises. Turn off the radio or television.

**Hands off:**
Keep your hands away from your face while talking.

**Speak naturally:**
Speak in a normal fashion without shouting or exaggeration. Shouting actually distorts the words. No mumbling; even people with normal hearing have trouble have trouble understanding mumbling. Speak at a normal rate, not too fast or too slow. Use pauses rather than slow speech to give the person time to process speech. A woman’s voice is often harder to hear than a man’s, because of its pitch. A woman might try to lower the pitch of her voice when talking to the hard-of-hearing to see if that helps.

**Rephrase:**
Rephrase, rather than repeat. If it is difficult for a person to understand you, find another way of saying the same thing, rather than repeating the original words. Also, recognize that hard-of-hearing people hear and understand less well when they are tired or ill.

(2) Much of this information comes from my.clevelandclinic.org/disorders/hearing loss.