

Stigma in Hearing Healthcare

Kevin Seitz-Paquette, AuD

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Stigma in Hearing Healthcare

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Sr Director of Audiologic Insights

What makes me smile: my dog



A Sonova brand

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Disclosures

- Speaker is employee and shareholder of Sonova, Unitron's parent company.
- Research presented today funded by IRC, of which Sonova is an active member.



Learning Outcomes

- After this course, participants will be able to identify 3 different forms of stigma.
- After this course, participants will be able to discuss how aging, hearing aid use, and hearing loss independently contribute to stigma.
- After this course, participants will be able to explain how to ask targeted questions during case history and counseling to more directly address stigma.



Limitations/Risks

- The applicability and accuracy of the course content may vary by the clinical, geographical, and cultural context; you should evaluate the course accordingly.
- As healthcare is rapidly evolving, new findings may change the validity of the information presented in this course. Providers should always consult the latest research and guidelines from professional associations.
- The interventions discussed in this course may be limited in generalizability, requiring practitioners to consider specific individual and population factors.
- The course may not cover all possible risk factors, diagnostic methods, or treatment options, and complex cases may require additional considerations.
- Healthcare providers should apply cultural competence and sensitivity to ensure effective and respectful care based on their patients' diverse needs.
- Providers should always evaluate the limitations of diagnostic and screening tools, considering their potential for false results as well as any ethical implications.
- It is the responsibility of course participants to critically evaluate the evidence from multiple sources to guide professional practice.

APA Dictionary of Psychology

stigma

n. the negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency. A stigma implies social disapproval and can lead unfairly to discrimination against and exclusion of the individual.

Forms of stigma

Public	Discrimination and devaluation by others
Systemic	Reduced access to care and resources due to policy
Self	Internalization of negative stereotypes

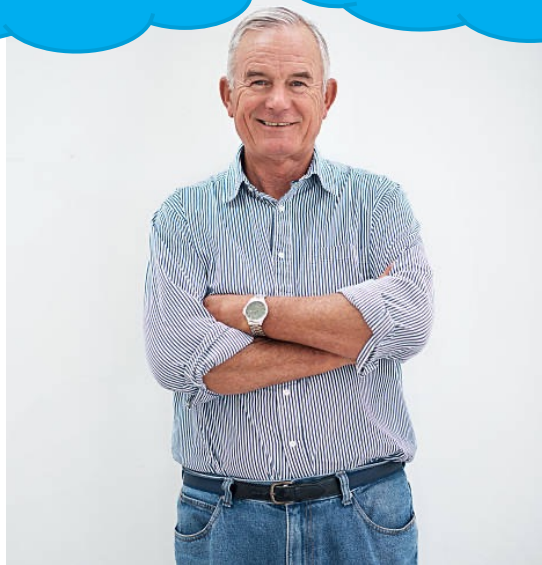
Forms of stigma

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Hearing aids

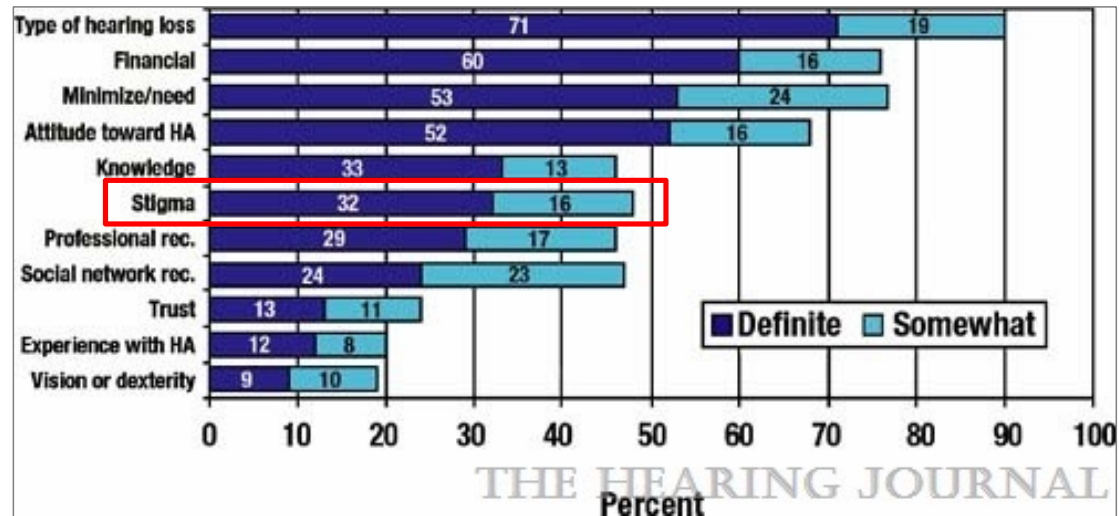
Hearing loss

Aging



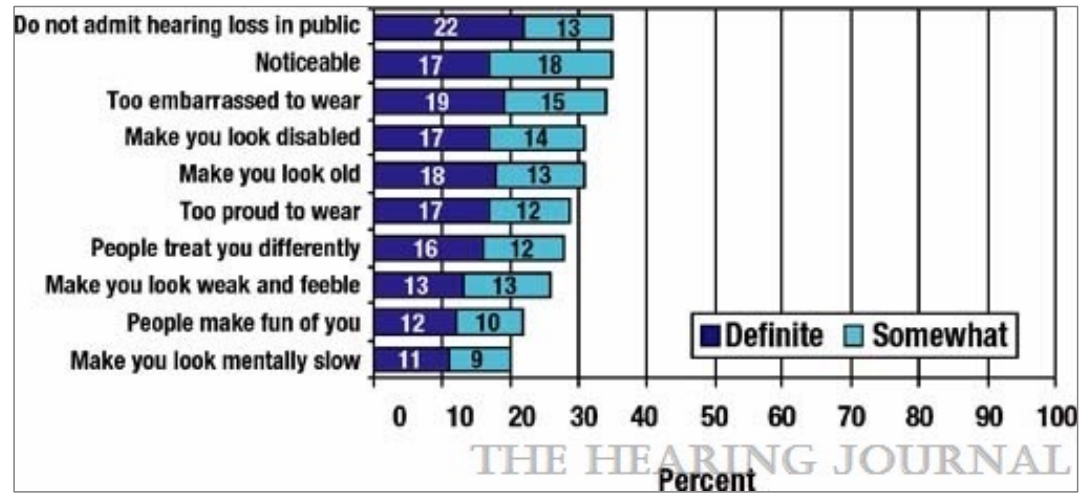
Hearing aid stigma

Reasons non-users cite for not adopting HAs:



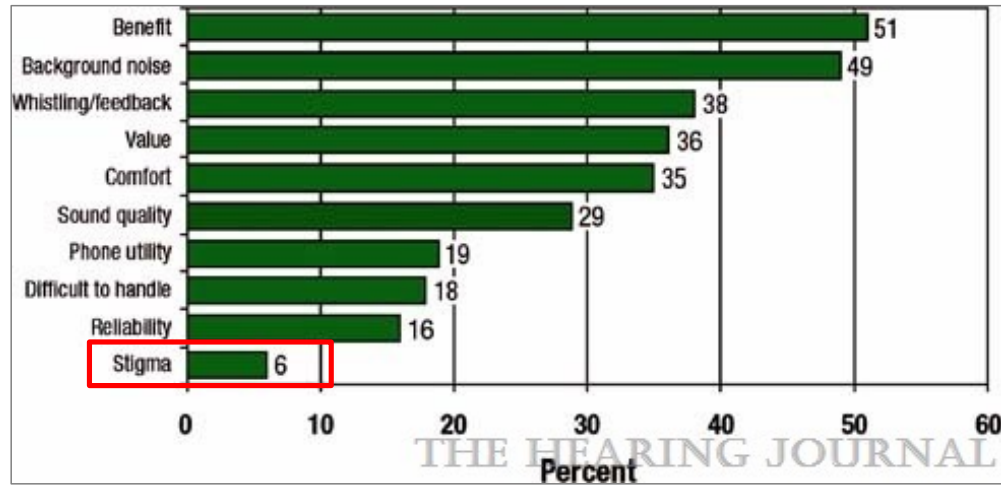
Hearing aid stigma

Specific reasons under broader “stigma” category for non-adoption:



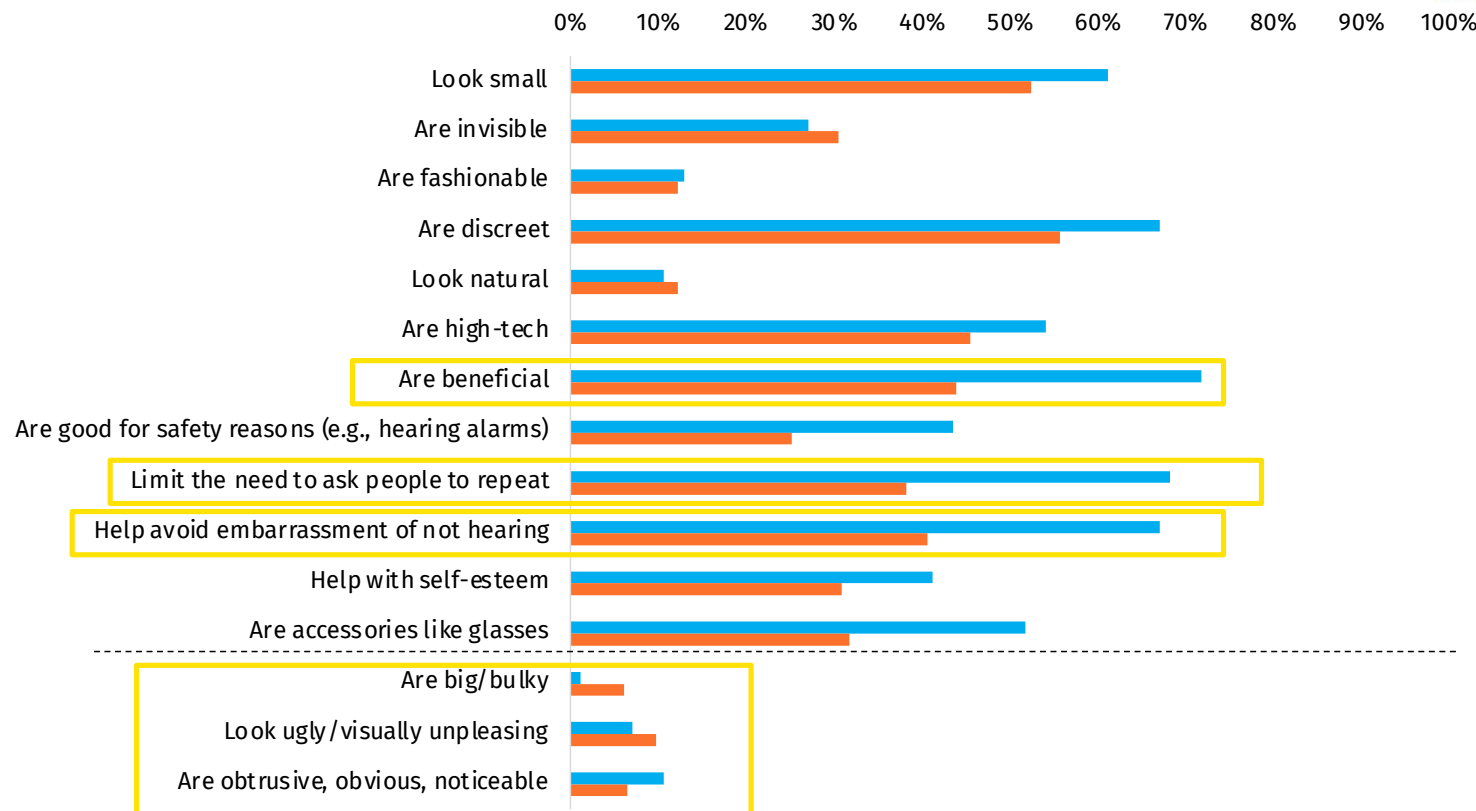
Hearing aid stigma

Reasons for HA return:



I think modern hearing aids ...

2025
Engage
with a Smile



Timmer, B. H. B., Ekberg, K., Meyer, C., Waite, M., Scarinci, N., Nickbakht, M., & Hickson, L (2024). Using Ecological Momentary Analysis to explore stigma experiences in the real world for adults with acquired hearing loss. *International Journal of Audiology*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14992027.2024.2418970>

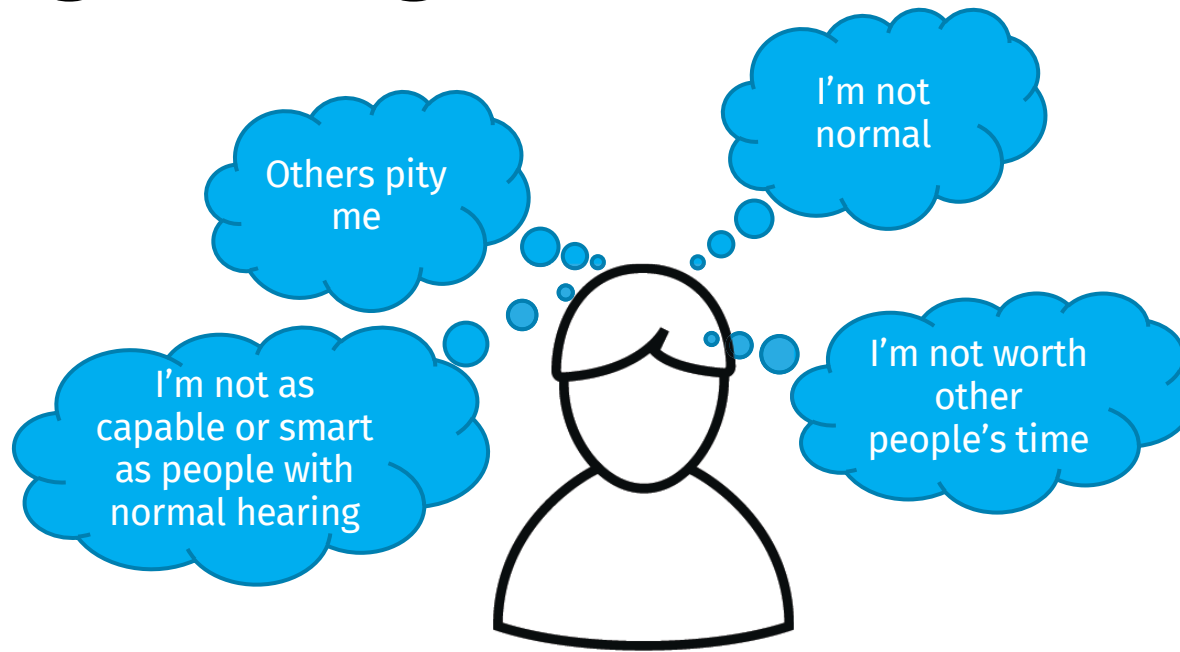
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Hearing aid versus hearing loss stigma

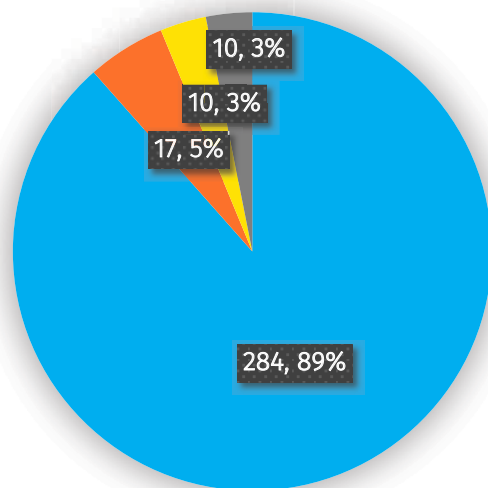
- Study of 191 women ages 35-85.
- All had age normal hearing.
- Stigma...
 - ...observed for *both* hearing aids and hearing loss.
 - ...decreases with age.
 - ...from hearing loss is greater than from hearing aids.

Hearing loss stigma

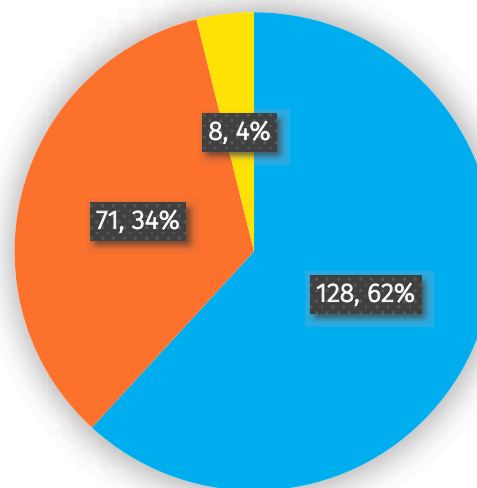


Revealing a HL

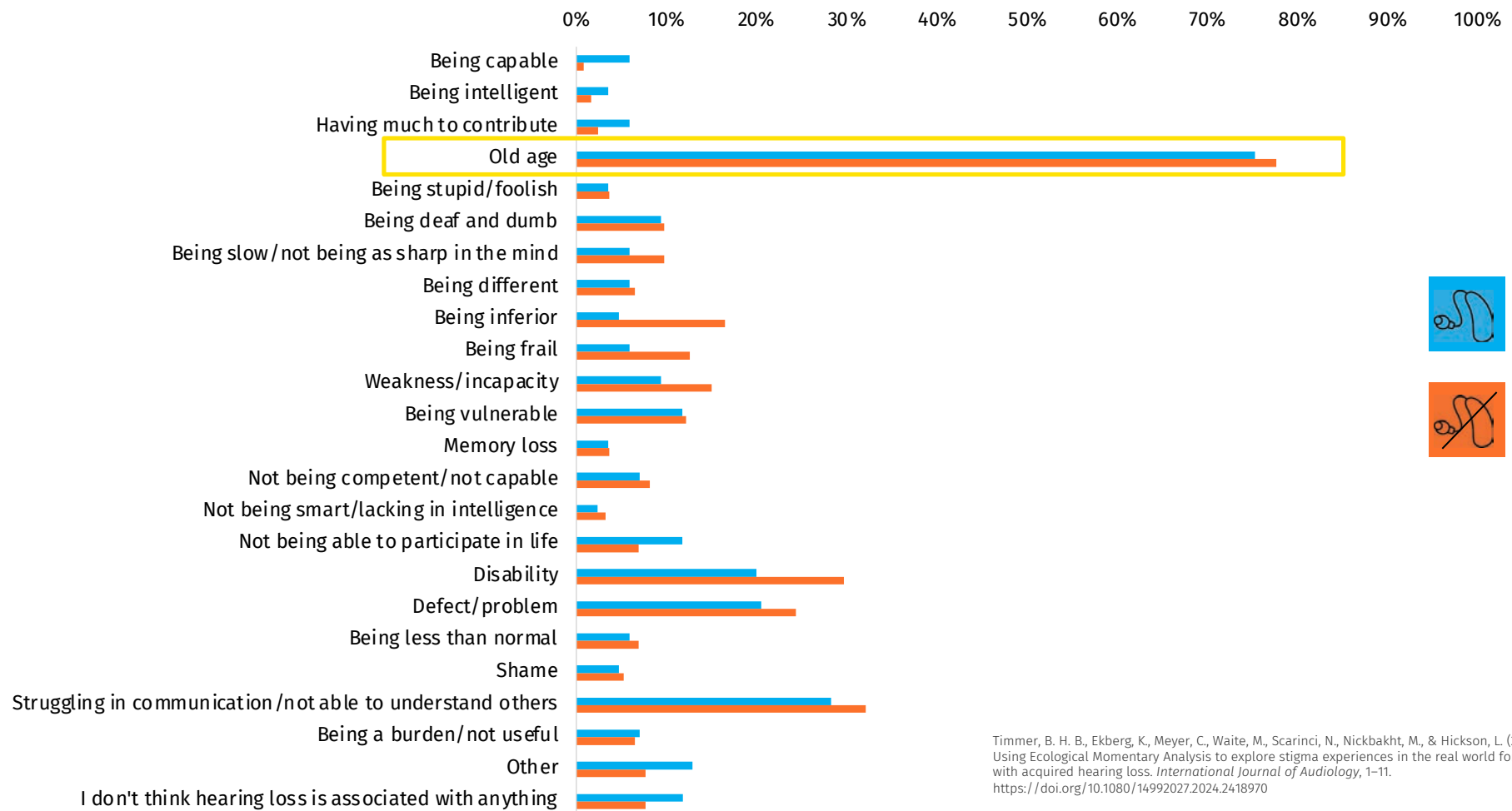
How did others know they had hearing difficulties?



- I have told them (now or earlier)
- They noticed my hearing difficulties
- Someone else has told them (now or earlier)
- They noticed my hearing aid/s

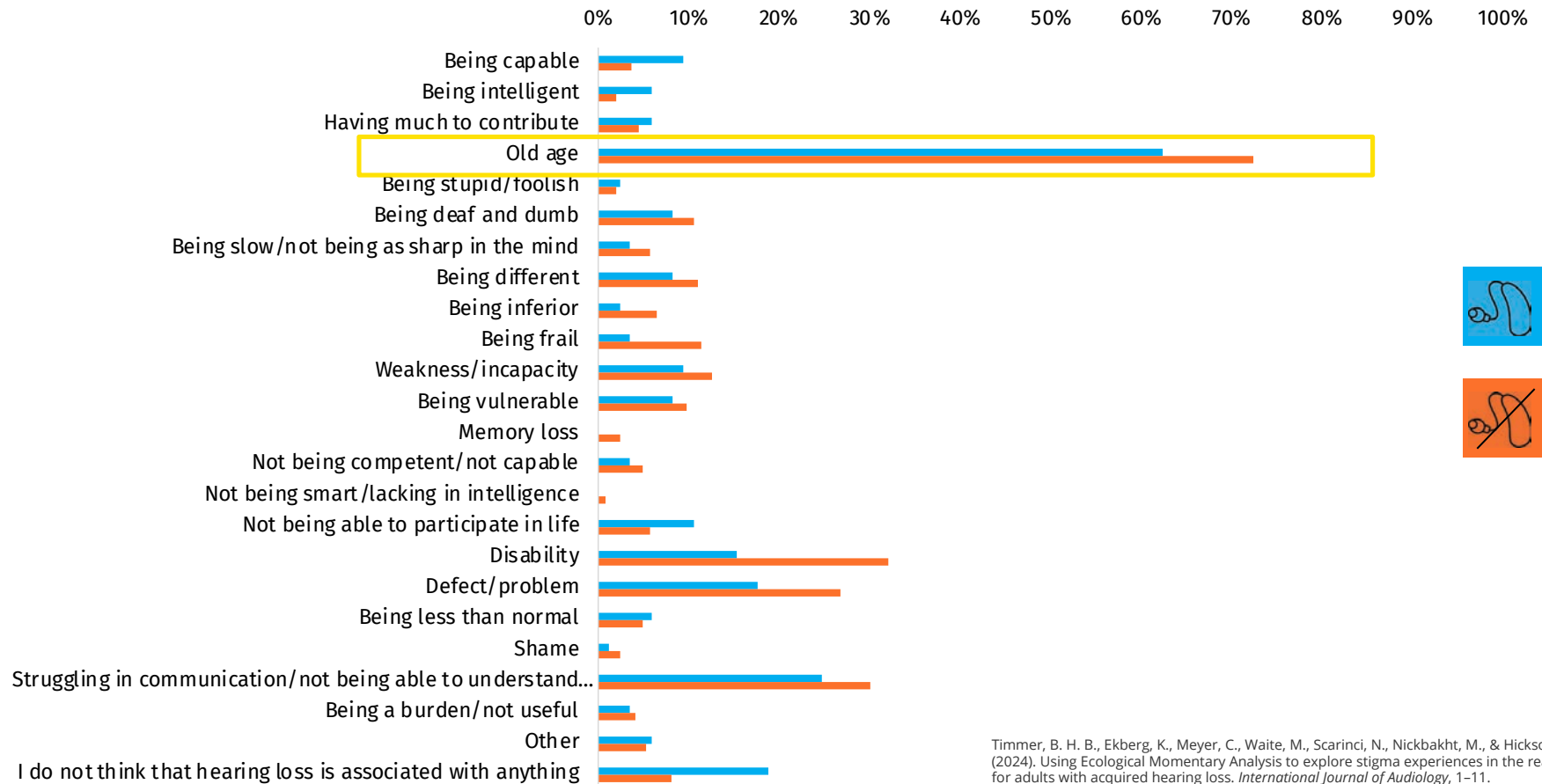


I think hearing loss is associated with ...



Timmer, B. H. B., Ekberg, K., Meyer, C., Waite, M., Scarinci, N., Nickbakht, M., & Hickson, L. (2024). Using Ecological Momentary Analysis to explore stigma experiences in the real world for adults with acquired hearing loss. *International Journal of Audiology*, 1–11.
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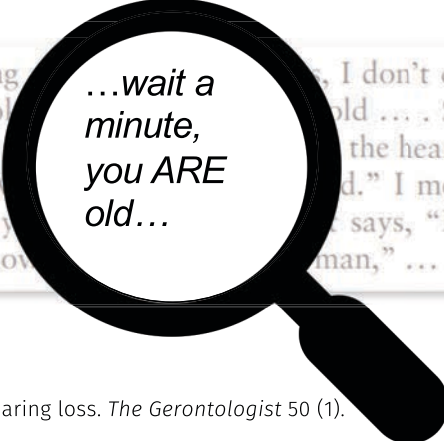
In their own words



...another
thing, like
my grey
hair...

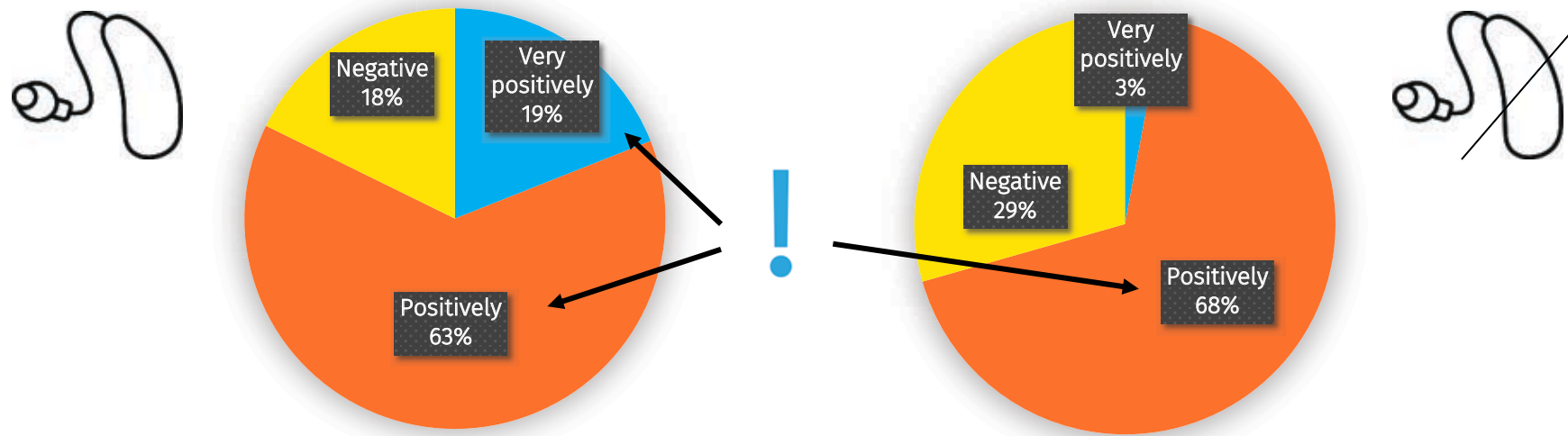


...it makes
you feel
like you're
getting
old...

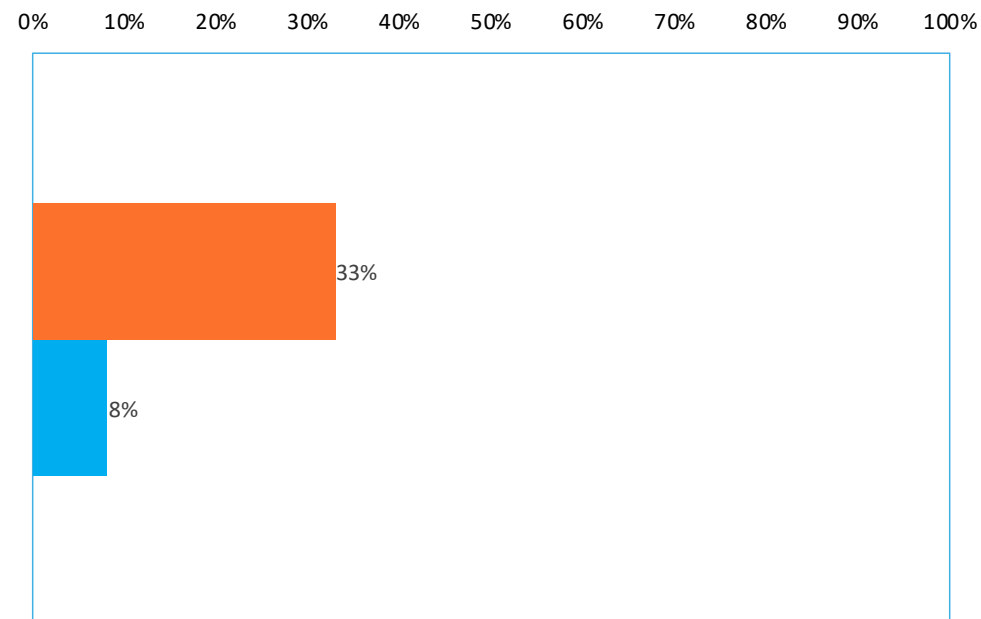


...wait a
minute,
you **ARE**
old...

Were you treated differently because of your hearing?



I would not disclose my hearing loss in any situation

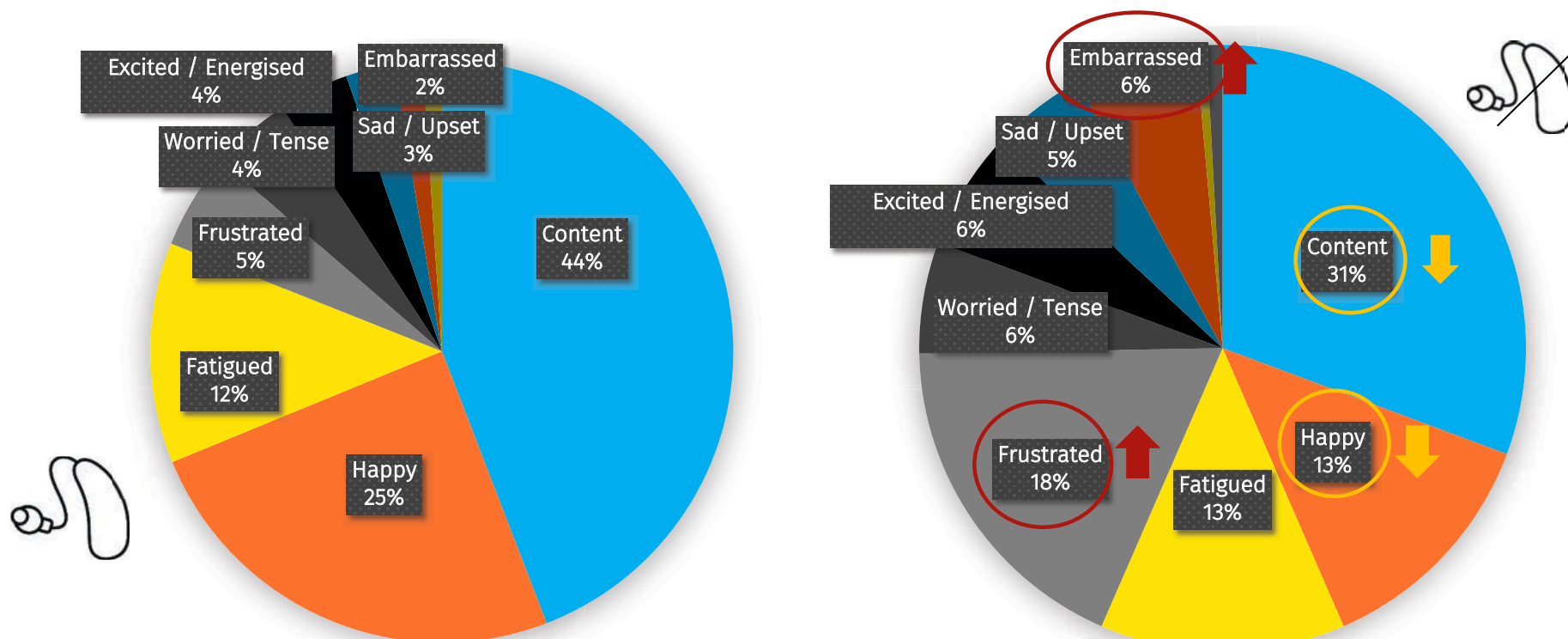


What does this have to do with me?

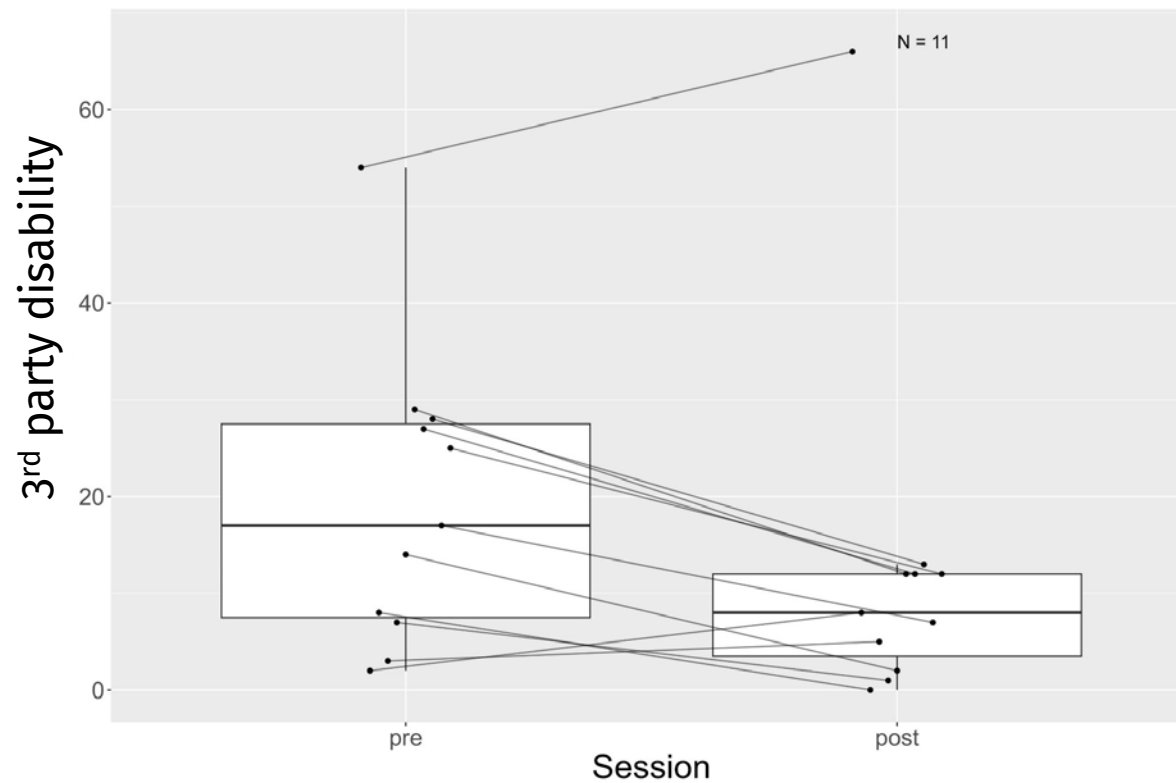
Every hearing care professional has a role to play, as do hearing aid manufacturers. Some hearing aid adverts seem to validate the stigma rather than tackling it, using terms such as “invisible fit” and highlighting the discreetness of hearing aids, signaling to the rest of society who may not need hearing aids (yet) that these are things that need to be hidden. Why can't we prioritize sound quality and quality of life instead?

Michael Lawrence, (then) audiology student who wears hearing aids

How did they feel during listening events?



Effects beyond the patient





Patients often focused on the stigma of hearing **loss**

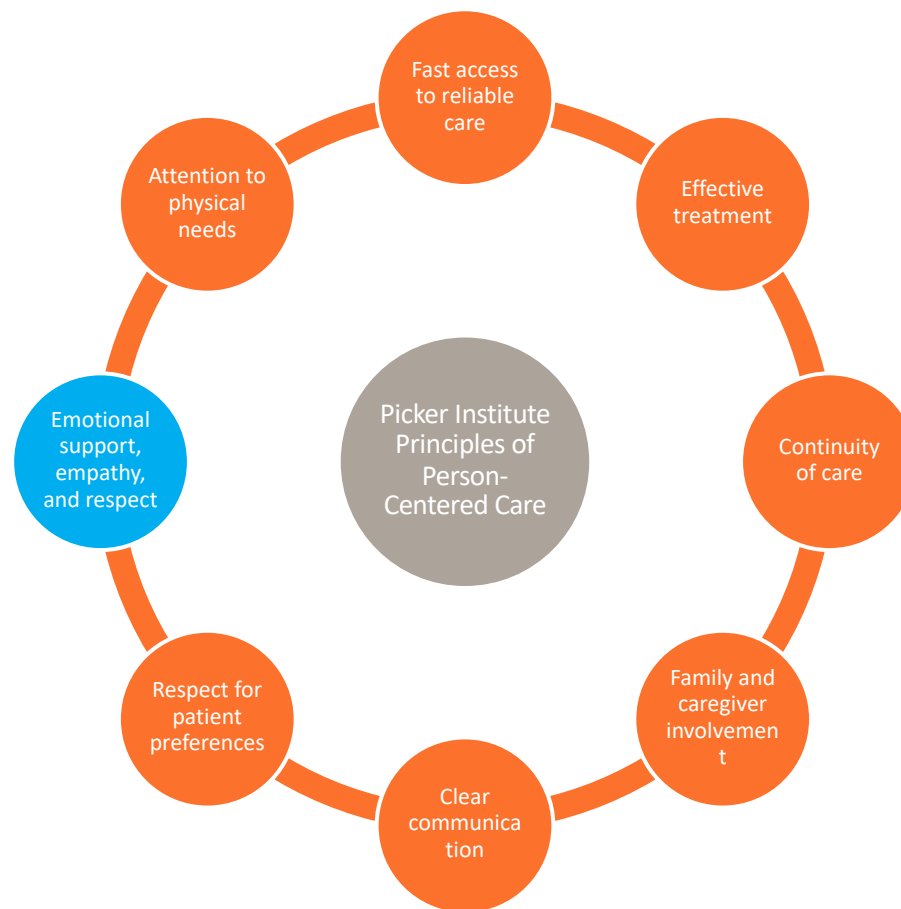
...they treat you differently, and it's not always positive...

HCPs focused on the stigma of hearing **aids**.

...there's a sense of stigma with a hearing aid, not... a hearing loss...

On the other hand...

Variable	HA purchasers	HA non-purchasers	<i>p</i>
Age	68.7	71.4	0.0009
HHIE-S	15.0	18.5	0.0001
→ Age stigma	2.4	2.5	0.2382
→ HA stigma	2.9	2.7	0.0416
Knows someone who has suspected HL	0.84	0.93	0.127



Empathy in healthcare



Empathetic approach to patient care leads to:

- Higher patient satisfaction
- Better treatment compliance
- Improved outcomes

James, T. (2023). Building empathy into the structure of health care. *Harvard Medical School: Trends in Medicine*. Accessed on March 31, 2023 via <https://postgraduateeducation.hms.harvard.edu/trends-medicine/building-empathy-structure-health-care>

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Empathy effect



891 diabetic patients, 29 physicians

Measure:

- A1c and LDL-C for patients
- Jefferson scale of empathy for physicians

High empathy scores for physician associated with improved A1c and LDL-C (and vice versa)

Hojat, M., Louis, D., Markham, F., Wender, R., Rabinowitz, C., and Gonnella, J. (2011). Physician's empathy and clinical outcomes for diabetic patients. *Acad Med* 86 (3)

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Give patients center stage

- Avoid dominating the conversation or asking leading questions
- Use your knowledge of stigma sources to better understand your patient
- Avoid using language that validates a stigma
- Recognize that you are understanding a patient through a lens shaped by your
 - Experiences
 - Education
 - Biases

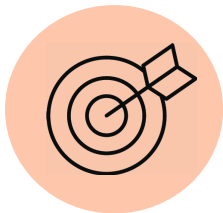
Conclusions



Ask every new patient whether and to whom they disclose their hearing loss



Recognize that both the source and importance of stigma will vary from patient to patient



Keep the goal in mind: Improving patient quality of life



Don't fixate on the device during counseling

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The hearing aid isn't the treatment—*you are.*



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