

New study could reduce risk of social isolation for older people with hearing loss

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The stages of descent into social isolation experienced by older people with hearing loss have been set out for the first time in a new study led by a researcher at the University of Stirling.

Analysis by Dr. Aysha Motala, a lecturer in psychology at the Faculty of Natural Sciences, could lead to more targeted interventions aimed at mitigating the impact on health and social lives. The study, "A Longitudinal Framework to Describe the Relation Between Age-Related Hearing Loss and Social Isolation," is [published](#) in the journal *Trends in Hearing*.

More than 65% of adults aged 60 years or over experience some form of hearing loss such as difficulties understanding speech when background sound is present, according to the World Health Organization's World Report on Hearing published in 2021.

Understanding the relationship between hearing loss and [social isolation](#) is vital because it is associated with [cognitive decline](#) and other health-related issues such as poor nutrition, smoking, [alcohol abuse](#), depression, and heart disease.

Comprehensive framework

Dr. Motala said, "Age-related hearing loss is a widespread concern among [older adults](#), affecting their daily lives and social interactions.

"While the association between hearing loss and social isolation is acknowledged, the precise mechanisms and stages involved are not well-defined.

"This work bridges that gap by proposing a comprehensive framework that delineates the progression from hearing difficulties to social withdrawal and eventual isolation, filling a significant knowledge gap in the field."

During the first stage—disengagement—older people with hearing loss have a tendency to zone out, become bored and suffer attention lapses.

The next stage—social withdrawal—sees them leave gatherings early and even avoid certain situations.

In the final stage—social isolation—older people with hearing loss will limit connections leading to a lack of companionship and support.

Targeted interventions

Dr. Motala and co-researchers Dr. Bjorn Herrmann (University of Toronto) and Professor Ingrid Johnsrude (University of Western Ontario) suggest a combination of interventions that may slow or halt the descent towards social isolation.

As well as clinical interventions, such as hearing aids, the researchers propose holistic interventions that tackle multiple issues, including psychological, social, and health issues, and provide a forum for socializing, education, and exercise to foster greater social engagement and participation.

Dr. Motala said, "Identifying these distinct stages offers valuable insights for developing targeted interventions. It may be useful for family doctors and audiologists who want to mitigate the risk of social isolation for their patients with hearing loss."

More information: Aysha Motala et al, A Longitudinal Framework to Describe the Relation Between Age-Related Hearing Loss and Social Isolation, *Trends in Hearing* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/23312165241236041](https://doi.org/10.1177/23312165241236041)

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