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## The Pandemic Has Made My Hearing Problem Even More of a Problem

Masks and social distancing are now essential, but they make life and work more difficult for those with serious hearing loss



ILLUSTRATION: SONIA PULIDO

By Mary Louise Kelly

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‘Good *mumble!*’ calls my neighbor from across the street.

“Good morning!” I call back.

She nods, continues: “Did you ever *mumble* from the *mumble mumble?*”

She is wearing a mask. I am wearing a mask. I can hardly make out a word she says. I step closer, straining to hear, one foot off the curb, then leaning halfway across the street. But, you know—6 feet and all. One can’t get too close these days. And our masks conspire to create the perfect double whammy: They both muffle her voice and prevent me from seeing and reading her lips. Even my friends with normal hearing say that they find conversation harder these days. For those of us with hearing loss, the coronavirus era is a nightmare.

**For those of us with hearing loss, the coronavirus era is a nightmare.**

I’ve worn hearing aids since 2014 and probably needed them long before that. My last checkup at the audiologist, back in February, revealed hearing loss in the severe-to-profound range at high frequencies. My ability to recognize words and distinguish consonants has worsened in the past year, in both ears. Did you just offer me a

*cup* of coffee? A *cut* of coffee? I can't hear the difference, but I'll go out on a limb here and guess that you asked if I'd like...a *cup*. Context is everything when you're missing every other word.

I finally gave in to hearing aids after a frustrating book tour in which I was crippled, at event after event, by not being able to hear the audience questions. I was in my early 40s, embarrassed by the stigma. But hearing aids were life-changing. I wept the day that I wore them home, partly for joy and partly at the realization of how much I had been missing. They don't fix everything, mind you. I still can't watch TV without the subtitles on.

And the batteries are prone to conking out with no warning at the worst possible moments. In the middle of the news conference at the July 2018 Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki? Check. While anchoring live coverage in January of the president's Senate impeachment trial? Check. At the theater, during a play I was thoroughly enjoying and will forever be left to wonder how it all turned out? Yep, check.

One recent night, lying awake at 2 a.m. after yet another Covid-19-quarantine-stress-induced nightmare, I started to wonder, *How am I going to make this work?* What if this is for the long haul and the coronavirus is changing daily habits for good?

On the one hand, from a purely auditory point of view, there is a silver lining: Crowded restaurants and noisy cocktail parties are out for the foreseeable future—two of the settings where my deafness makes it hardest to function. On the other hand: the mask double whammy. My job as a journalist requires me to ask people questions and then listen—really *listen*—to the answers. How can I do that when I can no longer hear you?

I have no interest in wading into the mask wars. People should wear them. I've interviewed too many scientists who say that they are our best tool to beat the virus. But along with social distancing, masks do pose particular challenges for those of us who are deaf or hard of hearing.

This point was driven home on an excursion to our local drugstore. I'd walked in, masked and armed with hand sanitizer, to pick up a prescription for my son. Bright yellow tape on the floor marks where I'm allowed to stand, 6 feet back from the counter, which is now topped with a Plexiglas barricade. I say my son's name and that I'm here for a refill. The pharmacist, who's also wearing a mask, nods and says, "*Mumble mumble mumble.*"

Maybe he's asking for my son's date of birth? I offer it. The pharmacist shoots me an odd look.

Maybe he needs our insurance card? I slide it from my wallet and hold it up.

Another odd look. The pharmacist speaks more slowly, a bored look creeping into his eyes. I still can't decipher a single word.

"WHAT'S THE PHONE NUMBER ON FILE FOR YOUR SON?" he finally bellows.

Five minutes later, I leave, clutching the medicine and feeling scared. How can I navigate our country and the world on behalf of NPR listeners when I can't navigate the neighborhood CVS?

I began trying to answer that question on the sole reporting trip I've made since the pandemic hit. As protests for racial justice swept American cities, my producer and I flew to Atlanta, where I grew up, to cover events in the cradle of the civil-rights movement.

It was a challenging trip. We had to swaddle our microphones in plastic wrap so we could wipe them with disinfectant between interviews. (Amazingly, the sound quality wasn't

## How can I navigate the world on behalf of NPR listeners when I can't navigate the neighborhood CVS?

affected.) The city was under curfew, its downtown boarded up. We met protesters carrying #BlackLivesMatter posters in one hand and jugs of milk in the other to douse their eyes when they got tear gassed. In the past, my editors have required me to pack body armor to report from Iraq and Afghanistan. It was a first to have it issued to report from my hometown.

But as we filed our stories, a miraculous thing became clear: I could still do my job. The experience reminded me of something earlier this year on a very different reporting trip to Tehran. Iranians, who cannot speak freely to an American journalist, nevertheless manage to find ways to tell you what's on their minds. In Atlanta, interviewing people whose words were muffled and whose lips were rendered invisible by masks, I nevertheless managed to find ways to hear them.

Some of it is obvious. *Can you speak up please?* I asked over and over. *Can you repeat that? A little louder?* I paid more attention to body language. And 6 feet of social distancing is impossible to maintain at a protest—a worry from a public health perspective but enormously helpful when you're trying to hear.

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A few days ago, I stopped by my audiologist's office to collect new, more advanced hearing aids. But even with the new gizmos, it is still hard to hear people wearing masks. On my way out, the doctor handed me a sheet of helpful hints for the pandemic, including tips to share with well-meaning friends and colleagues. Here's what I'm supposed to tell you: "Having hearing loss is a challenge, but trying to hear when people are wearing masks is even more difficult." The guidance continues, "Speak slowly. Be patient, kind and courteous." And: "Don't shout, overemphasize or over-exaggerate your words."

On that last point, I beg to differ. Enough *mumble mumble*. I've got a job to do. Until this is behind us, I'm going to need your help. So please shout. Feel free to do so with all the patience, kindness and courtesy you can muster—but shout away. I'll be counting on it.

—Ms. Kelly is a co-host of NPR's "All Things Considered" and the podcast "Consider This." Her latest novel is "The Bullet" (Gallery Books).

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