

Have you Heard? A Listening Project
Episode #13 - Brain Health
Hosts: Mary Catherine Hess & Alle Rhames

Mary Catherine (0:02) Hello and welcome to “Have you Heard? A Listening Project.” On this podcast we’re going to share tips, stories and practical advice to help people who experience hearing loss stay connected. If you or a loved one have a hearing loss or you know anyone who experiences hearing loss this podcast is for you. Today we’re going to be discussing Brain Health and how it’s connected to hearing challenges. We’re so excited to have you join us. I’m Mary Catherine, I’m one of your hosts, and today I’m also joined by Alle. We both work together at OEI as hearing health advocates, but before I introduce her, I want to remind you to stay until the end. At that point we’ll talk about some specific hearing health resources for you including tips for keeping your brain in tip-top condition. Today we’ll be talking about some of the ways individuals who experience age-related hearing loss can maintain their brain health. Alle has a particular passion for this work as she spent her early career working with individuals diagnosed with different forms of dementia including Alzheimer’s disease. So, let’s get to it, Alle, welcome!

Alle (1:09) Hi! Thank you so much. I’m so happy to be here and I’m so excited. As you mentioned, this is a really important topic that I find. Not only am I passionate about but I think that people really need to continue learning about, on a regular basis if possible, because people didn’t really use to talk about this. So, why it’s important to me? Oh, I’ll just explain, I have been with OEI for almost 14 years and about four years into my work with OEI, I realized a lot of the work that we were doing with people with hearing loss were also age-related and then therefore some had brain issues. Some had dementia, some had Alzheimer’s disease, there’s a whole range under that umbrella of dementia. I was so interested in the idea of, you know, the idea of brain health and how can you keep your brain healthy as we age and how is hearing loss connected to Alzheimer’s or dementia in general. So, I decided to get my Masters in Counseling specifically focusing on those with Alzheimer’s disease. Fast forward a few years and I did a lot of just extra work and I did internships with places that are adult day care centers. Basically, there are places for people with dementia and Alzheimer’s disease to go and spend their time and learn, play games. Typically, a lot of these people are already too far gone in their Dementia to really, you know, they’re really there to connect with other people have socialization be around each other just to learn. But in working with those people, I was learning how to connect that with the people with OEI who are maybe younger and were just interested in learning how to take care of their brain health. So, from there I began doing support groups and facilitating support

groups for people with dementia and then also their spouses. So anyways, I could go on and on about it but it's just, it's very interesting, the connection between brain health, hearing loss and then how to keep it all succinctly together and how to really figure it out and teach people on a daily basis.

Mary Catherine (3:13) And you know, it's so interesting because my experience working with people with hearing loss. I mean, I've worked with people, you know, of all ages including for a good part of my career working with babies and moms who have just had their children diagnosed as having hearing loss. So, working, when I took this job working with senior was fairly new to me. I didn't have a lot of experience with it and it was only in the last few years that I heard people starting to talk about the link between age-related hearing loss and dementia and I thought, well, that's really interesting cause I just didn't have much experience with that so I'm thrilled to be part of this podcast today and be talking about this.

Alle (3:52) Oh definitely and I just and I just want to point out for people age 60 and older there's actually a percentage of 36.4 of a risk of dementia associated with hearing loss. So, I think that's an incredibly important fact. I'm going to repeat that 36.4 people age 60 and older there's a risk between dementia and hearing loss and it's not to scare people, it's really to talk about what makes that true and why is hearing loss connected to dementia. You know what I'm saying? It's really about learning and educating each other.

Mary Catherine (4:23) And I think it's also important you mentioned 36.4% are at risk. It's important to note that a third of individuals over the age of 62 will experience some form of hearing loss so, (Alle...mmm, yeah) one third of them is 33%. So, we're already at kind of that same percentile of people who have hearing loss and who also are at risk for dementia. So that's an interesting little piece of data.

Alle (4:46) Right. I think Mary Catherine so that point is really vital because it's an isolation or it's this idea of isolation that I think really pertains to why hearing loss is really related to dementia. So, the isolation factor, that's a big one, especially in my experience I had seen it so much because when someone has hearing loss it's very scary. You really want to retreat and a lot of people do retreat, which is really sad so that means they stop socializing. They'll stay in their home more, they won't use the telephone because it's too hard to talk. They won't go to restaurants and especially if you add the pandemic into all of this where you really couldn't go anywhere anyways, that isolation factor skyrocketed, which then of course, relates, so much to have somebody continues their brain health and actually works their brain unless you're really dedicated to you know getting on the computer and doing those games or things that you can do on your own

but a lot of people just kind of sit around and lose that interest which then really diminishes the brain health. So, there's connections between the hearing loss and brain function. One thing we do know for sure are folks who have hearing loss if they just begin to use their hearing aids consistently which I mean that's so much easier said than done because going out to get hearing aids alone is a big huge step for people. But we do know that once you have a hearing aid and if you start using it consistently, we know that it will begin to show some improvement in staying connected and feeling less isolated. So, for example, if you have a hearing aid, you might be more likely to use the telephone. You might be more likely to use an amplified telephone or captioned telephone that works with your hearing aids and then provides you the ability to not be scared that you're going to miss somebody saying something or be scared that you're going to be pulled into a scam something like that, you know what I'm saying?

Mary Catherine (6:42) Mhmm, I do, I do. And you know it's so interesting because people who, you know, older adults who seek out hearing aids often times they go in there with the best of intentions and then for whatever reason they fall off the wagon. They don't want to wear their hearing aids, they don't like them or not well adjusted or they just haven't been fit properly. And I think this is just sort of a plug for going back to your provider where for those who are getting, who have gotten hearing aids but aren't really using them consistently making sure they're working with their provided to tweak them so that they are getting the most benefit from them. Because if you're getting good benefit from them, you're likely to use them and if you're likely to use them, again, you're reducing that risk so there's a little plug for audiologists out there.

Alle (7:27) Ha, ha, ha, no that's great and I just want to do a little, a little quote that I found really interesting or explain a little quote that I found, it was really interesting. So, a lot of different studies have been performed on hearing loss and dementia and a really easy way of pointing it out or explaining is, it's just explaining that it's a significant finding within all of the studies that have been done. One specifically with the World Health Organization it reports that over 10 million new cases of dementia around the world each year come about, that's a lot (Mary Catherine...that's a lot) I mean, that is a lot of, that's a big number. Yeah, and with two-thirds of Americans experiencing some level of hearing loss, so again, some level of hearing loss by the time they reach their seventies that's just age-related facts, we can potentially find a way to reduce the number of people that end up developing dementia. So, if people are more aware of the hearing loss that is either age-related or genetically related. In my case, we can actually, hopefully reduce that number of cases that pop up for dementia (Mary Catherine...exactly, exactly) so, yeah and let's go ahead and talk about some of the activities Mary Catherine, do you want to talk about some of the activities that we can help support the brain health?

Mary Catherine (8:42) Absolutely, so we've said over and over staying connected is super important for people who have hearing loss but other things that can really help keep you in tip-top shape, as we said earlier, was doing those just everyday household activities such as balancing a checkbook which I know it's strange to say cause everything's online now but still checking it (Alle...oh that makes perfect sense, yeah that makes perfect sense) checking your bank account and knowing how to do that online. Organizing different parts of your house, I've currently been trying to do that in my own home because I'm just trying to get a little bit more organized and I find that when my house is organized, I feel less distracted and I can only imagine the same as for our older adults. Other things like just folding your laundry, keeping up with your regular self-care, showering on a regular basis, getting dressed and going out. And then you know, those things that we all know are really helpful like just doing crossword puzzles, sudoku puzzles, word find. All of those area really, really great activities for keeping you focused and maintaining your attention on something. And then other things that you might consider doing when you're getting out of the house might be joining the Sil, what is it called? Silver Sneakers is that the YMCA program? (Alle...right, right) I think that's what it's called Silver Sneakers where they do activities for seniors including like dance classes, bingo sometimes they are going out on field trips together but also just exercise classes or walking groups or maybe even joining a book group. All of those are great ways to stay connected and keep your brain active. Okay, so let's pause for a moment and hear a word from our sponsor.

*** Commercial (10:21) So mom finally decided to sell the house and move into that cute condo near her sister. I'm happy for her and there's so much to do. The problem is she can't hear me when I call. Even with her hearing aids trying to talk about details over the phone is impossible. I'm constantly repeating myself and half the time I don't really think she gets what I said. Fortunately, we learned about the CapTel Captioned Telephone, it works just like captions on TV. If she can't hear what I say, she can read the captions. Our local CapTel Outreach person took care of everything. She helped set up the phone explained about the free captioning service and made sure that mom was comfortable reading the captions. Now mom has the confidence to handle details over the phone by herself knowing she'll catch every word. If someone you care about has difficulty hearing over the phone find out how a CapTel Captioned Telephone can help, visit oeius.org for details.

Alle (11:19) Welcome back! So, speaking of CapTel Captioned Telephones, as we mentioned, people talking on the phone we do know how important it is to stay connected and CapTel is a really great way to minimize isolation while living alone during the pandemic or just whenever just when you need to reach out to someone because that amplification mixed with the captions there's just nothing

better if you do have a hearing loss.

Mary Catherine (11:43) And along those lines we've talked about this but it's just, it's so important to make sure you stay connected. Socializing is incredibly important and especially when people are feeling alone. Connecting even over the phone as we talked about with the CapTel and we've seen studies show that people who continue to stay active going to church being part of their book group volunteering maybe even still working taking online classes, all of those things are really important because you continue to feel productive and that you have a purpose and that is really important. In addition, diet making sure you're eating good healthy balanced diet. I know my doctor recently gave me the, the, the shake, shook the finger at me and told me I needed to work on my diet, which is something I've been working on and I've noticed even for me I'm starting to feel a little bit better and my clarity of mind is better. Now that I've started to change my diet (Alle...oh that's fantastic) yeah, I, I've, who knew that, cookies for breakfast, no I'm just kidding, I don't have cookies for breakfast but you know.

Alle (12:52) Mary Catherine, you know what they say is that the Mediterranean diet is supposed to be excellent and I love Mediterranean food that includes, I don't know if you've ever had grape leaves or hummus with baba ghanoush. There's a lot of different ways to eat Mediterranean salad with tomatoes, but anyways, they do recommend a Mediterranean diet just throughout your entire life as being something that's really important for basic health and in addition to hopefully fighting dementia or, you know, the future of dementia. So, that's just something to point out and in addition what you were talking about in terms of joining groups at the church or things like that. I think it's excellent that you mentioned that because just as a person who wants to be a part of something you want to just definitely socialize yourself in a way that makes you feel excited. You know, what makes you feel happy? That's what we want to do, is we want to just always try to get out there and join a group, go to happy hour, you know, do bingo with people that you may not know but you want to get to know, it's just things like that. Joining groups is a great way to keep socializing a part of your life.

Mary Catherine (13:57) Absolutely, absolutely. Into your point about the Mediterranean diet, I, I'm actually planning to make some hummus for dinner tonight, so I'm looking forward to that (Alle...mmm, I love hummus) love it, love it, love it. Alright (Alle...so good) and of course exercise we all know that we need to get our exercise every day, you know, getting out and walking at least 30 minutes every day it's great for the heart but it's also great for the brain. So, making sure that you're doing some kind of exercise. I actually have been doing a lot of water aerobics or not water aerobics, hydrotherapy cause I've been working on a knee injury and I've noticed that just getting out and doing that

couple of times a week I feel so much better but exercise it's just key to all of this as well. Alright (Alle...that's very cool) so, Alle I'm going to turn it back over to you, you've got some tips for brain health? Or for healthy brain?

Alle (14:44) I do, I was just going to say, yes, I want to discuss now 8 tips for maintaining brain health and everybody this article that we found is excellent. The first thing that you were just talking about is exercise. I can't focus enough on how important exercise is. I believe that 30 minutes at least five times a week is recommended. So, 30 minutes a day of exercise where you, you at least kind of gain a little bit of a sweat, that's, that's what experts say. But breaking that sweat and engaging and just a regular cardio vascular exercise that elevates the heart. That's what you want to focus on and it increases the blood flow then to the brain and to the body. So, you're actually doing really good for yourself by doing that and the many studies that have actually linked regular physical activity links it with a reduced risk of cognitive decline. So, getting your exercise every day 30 minutes at least five times a week, if you can. Also, if you smoke, you know, there's that whole thing, don't smoke, well there's a reason for it because evidence shows that smoking increases the risk of cognitive decline, did you know that? I didn't know that prior, you know, to all of my work....

Mary Catherine (15:53) I did know that, I did know that, not that not that I've ever been a smoker, but I've seen enough people who smoked well into their older age that I can definitely see the decline that has happened, so.

Alle (16:04) Right, so quitting smoking can actually reduce that risk to levels comparable to those who have not smoked so the sooner you quit the better. Try to keep a healthy heart, so what does that mean? Evidence shows that risk factors for cardiovascular disease, so heart disease and stroke, obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes obviously can really negatively impact your cognitive health so preventing and managing high blood pressure you know, going and getting checked getting on medication if you have to and also your cholesterol, it'll help protect the heart and take care of the brain in the same way. So, if you think of the heart and the way that it produces the blood flow to the brain, you see the connection right there automatically. So, if you can exercise your heart, exercise your body, you're therefore exercising your brain. We discussed this already too so eating a healthy and balanced diet, I mentioned the Mediterranean diet, you know, but religiously following a diet that's low in fat, high in vegetables, high in fruit it's also been liked to reducing the risk of cognitive decline and research you know, although on diet it's limited, you know, people will say, well it doesn't prevent but it definitely does help your physical body, your heart and therefore your brain. Again, the Mediterranean diet, there's another one called DASH, it's DASH so it's dietary approaches to stop hypertension. Those two may contribute to a reduced risk of cognitive decline so get in your healthy food.

Mary Catherine (17:32) That's so funny you say that, I have a dog named Dash and I can tell you my blood pressure has certainly gone down since we adopted him. He's super cute (Alle...ohhh) and he keeps us on our toes. There's lots of chasing him so I guess that's good for the heart as well but that's my Dash.

Alle (17:46) That's really good, animals, animals are wonderful. This one I actually have a problem with so getting enough sleep, I, I struggle with that one and it's a, it's a hard one (Mary Catherine...yeah) so not getting enough sleep actually may result in problems with memory and thinking wouldn't you know it. I definitely know that when, so I have a somewhat newborn an infant who's about three months and a two-and-a-half-year-old so I don't get much sleep and I've noticed on the days that I get zero sleep versus the days that I get maybe 2 hours of sleep even those two hours make my brain a lot clearer the next day if you can believe it. So, it really does make a difference and studies show that a third of American adults report getting less sleep than is required so that's not good. Staying socially engaged as we also mentioned earlier is a very important factor. So, getting in those games, getting in those happy hours, going out with friends, making plans just make plans with family and friends and now that you know, the pandemic is obviously still here but people are able to get together a little bit more. I think it's really important to make those dates, get out socialize when you can safely. Also, continue to learn and welcome challenges this is a really interesting one and what does that mean anyways but you know, the games that we were talking about such as puzzles, if you're alone, puzzles are a great fun way, at least, I think they are, they're a great fun way to keep your brain working and to you know, do something that is on your own and there are also puzzles online. So, if you're computer friendly, look up games online that include puzzles online. You can meet other people online as well which to play games with that's always an option as well but just encourage that strategic thinking. I think it's really important to continue welcoming those challenges. I know that my husband, he likes to challenge himself by learning a new language, if you can believe that. So, he actually taught himself basic German, I mean, this is something that amazed me when I first met him and now, he is teaching himself French. So, you know, you don't have to go that far but you can just challenge yourself a little bit. If you have the time and make the time, do it for yourself. And then of course you know don't forget about your mental health, it's something that I think that we let it go to the wayside. If you're taking care of kids, or you're taking care of an aging parent you know, you just don't have the time to take care of yourself but it's like on the airplane when they would always say if you have to put on an oxygen mask on yourself or your child, put it on yourself first so that you can then take care of the oxygen mask for your child and in that same way, don't forget about your own mental health even if you are caring for someone else. Because studies do show the link between depression and an increased risk of cognitive decline. Managing that stress and seeking medical attention for

any signs or symptoms of depression is super important anxiety is included and you know, any other mental health concern. Just be aware of it don't be afraid to go check yourself out, go make your annual doctor's appointment. I just want to reiterate, go make your annual doctor's appointment. If you are having you know a hard time hearing, go to your audiologist just get it checked out. My father recently told me, he is 73 and he has slight hearing loss, it doesn't really run in his, on side of the family but he was nervous because he was losing his hearing on his left ear and when he went to his audiologist all they did was take out the wax and he could hear again. I'm not saying that's how it is for everybody but what I'm saying is that you can do something about it, you know, once you go get your hearing checked, you may need a hearing aid, you may just need wax out of your ear but you won't know unless you go.

Mary Catherine (21:30) Exactly, exactly. So Alle, those were some really great tips, is there anything else we need to know about that article?

Alle (21:37) I know it was a really long list, however, it's super comprehensive and it really details out everything that you need to know in one article. If you guys do want to get a copy of that you can and you can go to our website, which is oeius.org and click on contacts, you can get a copy of it right there.

Mary Catherine (21:58) All right. And another website you might look at is healthyhearing.com, it has a lot of detailed information regarding the connection between brain health and hearing loss and other things associated with hearing loss. But if you really just wanting to connect with people cause I know we talked a lot about online resources but with people you might look to your local HLAA chapter that's the Hearing Loss Association of America and to just show you how long I've been around, I remember when they were called SHHH, SHHH (Alle... oh wow) Self Help for Hard of Hearing but it is a National Organization that has local chapters sometimes just at the state level but often sometimes at the city level. I'm here in Texas and my local chapter, prior to the pandemic was very active. They would meet monthly and they would offer educational programs, they would offer, they have activities together, they've had a holiday parties but they were a really great (Alle...who doesn't love a holiday party) exactly, we can't wait till we can have holiday parties again (Alle...I know) So, I remember the last time I went to their holiday party; they had us all signing which is kind of an interesting experience with amplification, etcetera but we were all signing together. So, anyway so you might look to your local HLAA chapter for some kind of local support. To sum things up, you want to find ways to stay connected, you want to keep yourself active and to maintain tip-top brain health and make sure you're getting your hearing checked annually and as Alle said, schedule your annual checkup with your doctor. So, for more information on hearing health resources, please be sure to visit us at oeius.org again that's oeius.org and don't

forget to join us next month when we're going to be celebrating the 31st anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act and its positive impact on people with disabilities and in particular folks who have hearing loss. In the meantime, don't forget to subscribe to this podcast so you don't miss out. So, I'm Mary Catherine (and I'm Alle) and we want to thank all of our listeners for joining us today on the "Have you Heard" podcast and remember to stay safe and stay connected (Alle...bye) bye.

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