

# First Nations Hearing Loss and Elder Care

AMSANT  
Elder Care Support Program  
Workforce Training  
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By Dr Damien Howard  
Phoenix Consulting



# The presenter

- Dr. Damien Howard, a psychologist based in the Northern Territory with over 30 years of experience. His work has focused on investigating the psychosocial and minimizing the effects of conductive hearing loss and auditory processing problems prevalent among First Nations people.
- In remote communities, approximately 60% of First Nations people have hearing loss, with an even higher proportion among elders. So most elders you work with will have varying degrees of hearing loss.





# This presentation

- Was developed in consultation with Jody Barney – a Deaf First Nations woman who has worked as an advocate, interpreter and service provider for First Nations Deaf and hard of hearing people for over 35 years.
- Jody and Damien provide hearing loss responsive training to professional groups and organizations.
- Jody and Damien recently collaborated with Alex Devine and others from Melbourne Uni to develop information about [First Nations Deaf and Hard of Hearing people using the NDIS in the NT.](#)
- Patrick May, a Larrakia man, also helped with the language used in this presentation

Artificial Intelligence was used by Damien Howard in the creation of many images used in this presentation

# HOW MANY INDIGENOUS ADULTS HAVE IT?



Up to 40% in urban areas 60 % of in remote communities have some degree of hearing loss

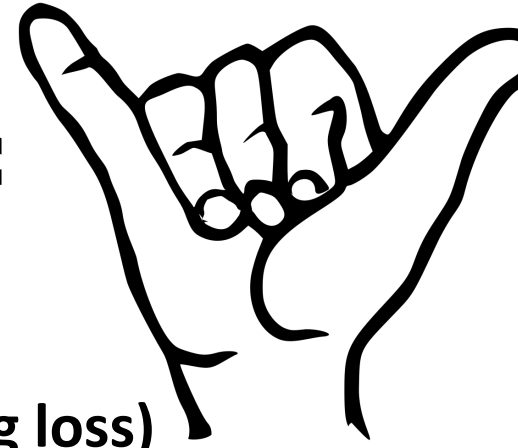
In some specific populations it is higher  
✓ 94% of prison inmates

79% of those affected are not aware they have hearing loss





# Comparing Hard of Hearing and Deaf



## HoH

(mild to moderate hearing loss)

- Many more people in First Nations community are hard of hearing ( 60% in remote communities)
- Most of them (80%) are unaware they have a hearing loss. **Invisibility of impact of hearing loss major issue.**
- **Misunderstanding common**
- When people find it hard to hear they will feel – **shame**
- Clear sharp sounds and seeing body language and facial gestures are important for communication.

## Deaf

(Severe to profound hearing loss)

- Similar % to in mainstream .
- Hearing loss is clear when they use sign language, speak differently, look confused, or don't speak at all
- People don't know Whitefella sign language (Auslan) means involving families to help with communication support
- **Extreme isolation common**
- proactive visual communication important – make people feel comfortable by communicating their way.

# Origins of hearing loss



allows infections to spread more easily and hygiene is compromised when washing and bathroom facilities are overwhelmed.

More frequent and severe ear infections cause more hearing loss.



# Hearing Loss Starts Early

## First Nations hard of hearing



Child development

Schooling

Training

Work and family life

Old age

## Mainstream hard of hearing



Old age

85% of mainstream hard of hearing over 50. So hearing loss has not impacted on earlier life.





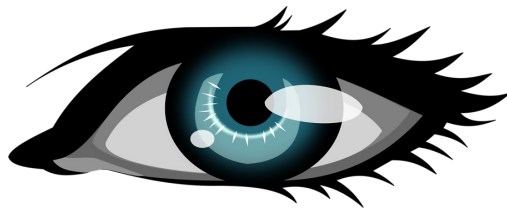
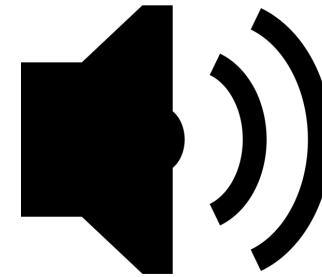
**Many have hearing loss,  
but few know they do**

# WAYS OF HELPING



**DOING THINGS IN FAMILIAR  
WAYS**

**MANAGING NOISE**



**SHOWING NOT JUST TELLING**

**AMPLIFICATION**



# DOING THINGS IN FAMILIAR WAYS



First nations people with hearing loss prefer culturally familiar communication and service delivery processes.



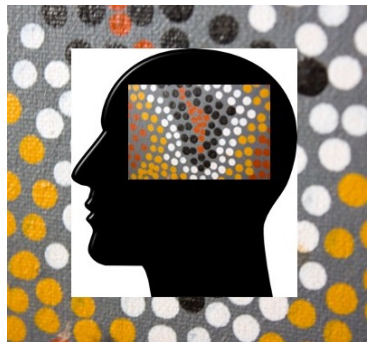
So those with hearing loss often rely on **family** members to help engage with mainstream services.

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If Family are not available those with hearing loss will rely on **First Nations staff.**



# Help from family and Countrymen

- Family know how the person feels, and what they like
  - they can know what elders want, without too much talk.
- Countrymen know the cultural ways the person best understands
  - They know how to explain things in the way that the elder will understand.
- It can help if staff from other cultures learn from family and people from same culture how to do things.
  - So important for to get help from family and Countryman







# Western Staff

Can improve communication if they:

- Use easy to understand English and commonly used local words
- **Use more facial expression and gesture**
- Learn basic sign language
- **Use more visual cues to explain**
- Be aware of noise levels
- **Be aware of elders limited exposure to Western ways of thinking**
- Use cultural mentors and interpreters



# Common misunderstandings

- Some First Nations people speak less English and don't understand Western ways because they are 'more Aboriginal'.
- People have not learnt English and Western ways because they are 'less educated or even less intelligent'.
- However, in fact hearing loss has been a major obstacle in learning English, succeeding at school and learning Western ways.
  - People are often very sensitive about visual indications of these kind of judgments.
  - *"you see that look that tells you they think you are just another dumb Blackfella. Then you don't want to ask them to say it again, but you want to get away and have nothing more to do with them"*





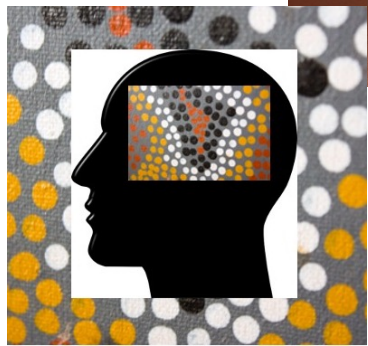
# TRUE STORY

First Nations people with hearing loss often avoid people speaking English, or using big words in English, because they worry about being shamed by not understanding



This starts in childhood

And often continues through life, into old age





# Hearing loss and closing the gap

- When people with hearing loss have to engage with services that require good English and knowing 'Whitefella' processes, they often **avoid them**, or feel culturally unsafe and don't fully utilize them. For example;
- Schooling
- **Welfare**
- Health and
- **Aged care**
- **The lack of hearing loss responsive services is a barrier to closing the gap.**



# IT IS LIKELY THOSE ELDERS WHO

- Avoid engagement with staff
- Get annoyed and upset really quickly
- Stay by themselves and are isolated
- Have more trouble getting on with other elders
- Worry more than others
- Are depressed
- **HAVE A HEARING LOSS**



# SHOWING NOT JUST TELLING

Using visual communication strategies helps those with hearing loss understand what people are trying to say





# Sign language – ‘action’

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- First Nations languages have signing, as an important part, as well as just words
  - When First Nations people speak English they use signs as well as talking
  - These give visual ways to help understand. This really help First Nations people with hearing loss.
- This is one reason First Nations people with hearing loss prefer help from Countrymen, because they use gestures and sign to help them understand.
- Other staff can learn some key signs to help elders to better understand



# Face watching and lip reading

- Facial expression and lip reading are important parts of 'action'.
- So it is important that there is enough light, to see the face of the person speaking, but not too bright.







# Masking

But when someone wears a mask this means their face and lips cannot be seen.

This makes it harder for people with hearing loss to understand what is said.

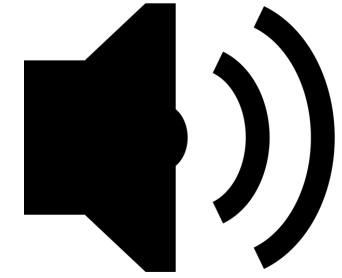


# Using pictures and images

- Using images to help explain visually what is going to happen or what you are talking about helps understanding.
- Here you can see using photos on a phone to explain what is happening later





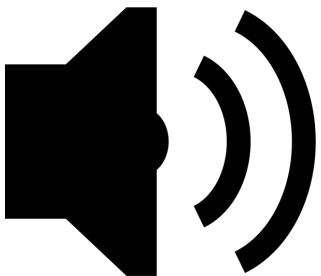
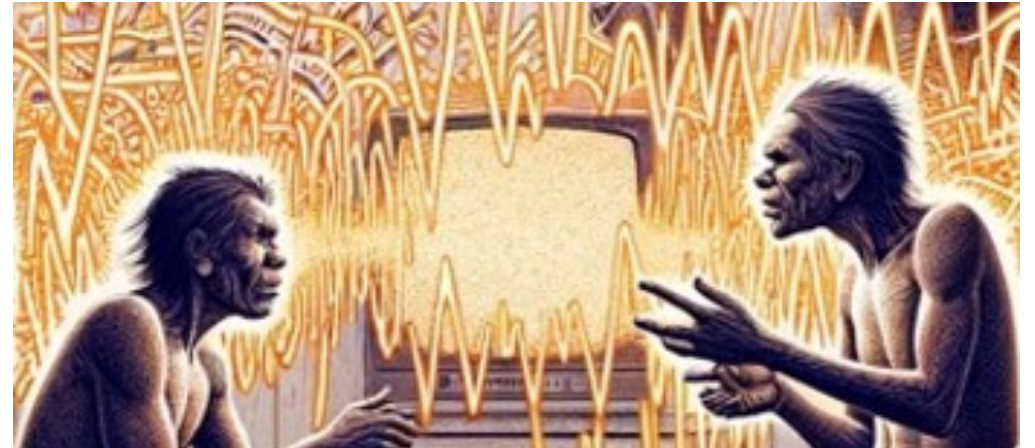


# Managing Noise

People with good hearing can understand better when there is background noise than those with hearing loss.

# Too much noise

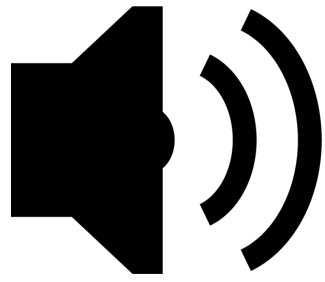
- It is harder for someone with hearing loss to understand what is said when there is background noise.





# Problems with noise

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- Look for signs of elders finding noise levels hard.
  - Worried face,
  - asking for things to be said again
  - leaning closer,
  - turning one ear to you,
  - showing frustration.

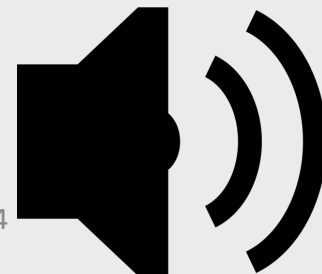




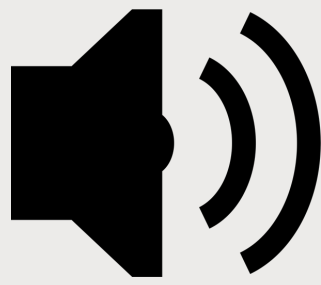


# Reducing noise

- Move to where it is quieter
- Turn down TV or music
- Ask people to speak quietly
- Move closer to elder







# Privacy

- Speaking **loud enough** for elders with hearing loss to hear means they may worry about their business being 'over heard' by others.
- If so, you may
  - Move somewhere private so you can speak louder. Outside under a tree may be preferable.
  - **Move closer to elder, so you do not have to speak so loud**
  - Use a hand held amplification device
  - **Use sign and gesture or pictures on your phone** – for example show a picture of a toilet if you think the person wants to go to the toilet. Then they can just nod yes.







# AMPLIFICATION

There are several types of amplification. Most people know hearing aids worn by people with hearing loss. But hand held amplification devices that are carried by support workers can also help a lot.

# Hand held amplification devices

These are small devices about the size of a mobile phone that amplify the voice of the speaker through earphones.

They can help a person with hearing loss understand what is said if there is

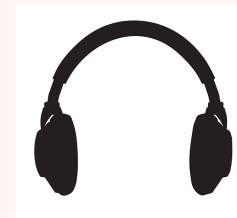
**You are wearing a mask**

**Giving multistep instructions**

**When in a noisy place**

**When privacy is required in a public space**

**Whenever good communication outcomes are essential**



# OTHER WAYS OF LISTENING

When people have hearing loss from a young age they develop other ways of listening – like visual listening and thinking listening.





# Visual listening

When hearing loss starts early in life people come to rely on **visual information** to fill in gaps created by hearing loss

- They watch intently the body language and facial expression of those speaking.
- **Anything that makes it harder to see will make it harder to understand what is said.**

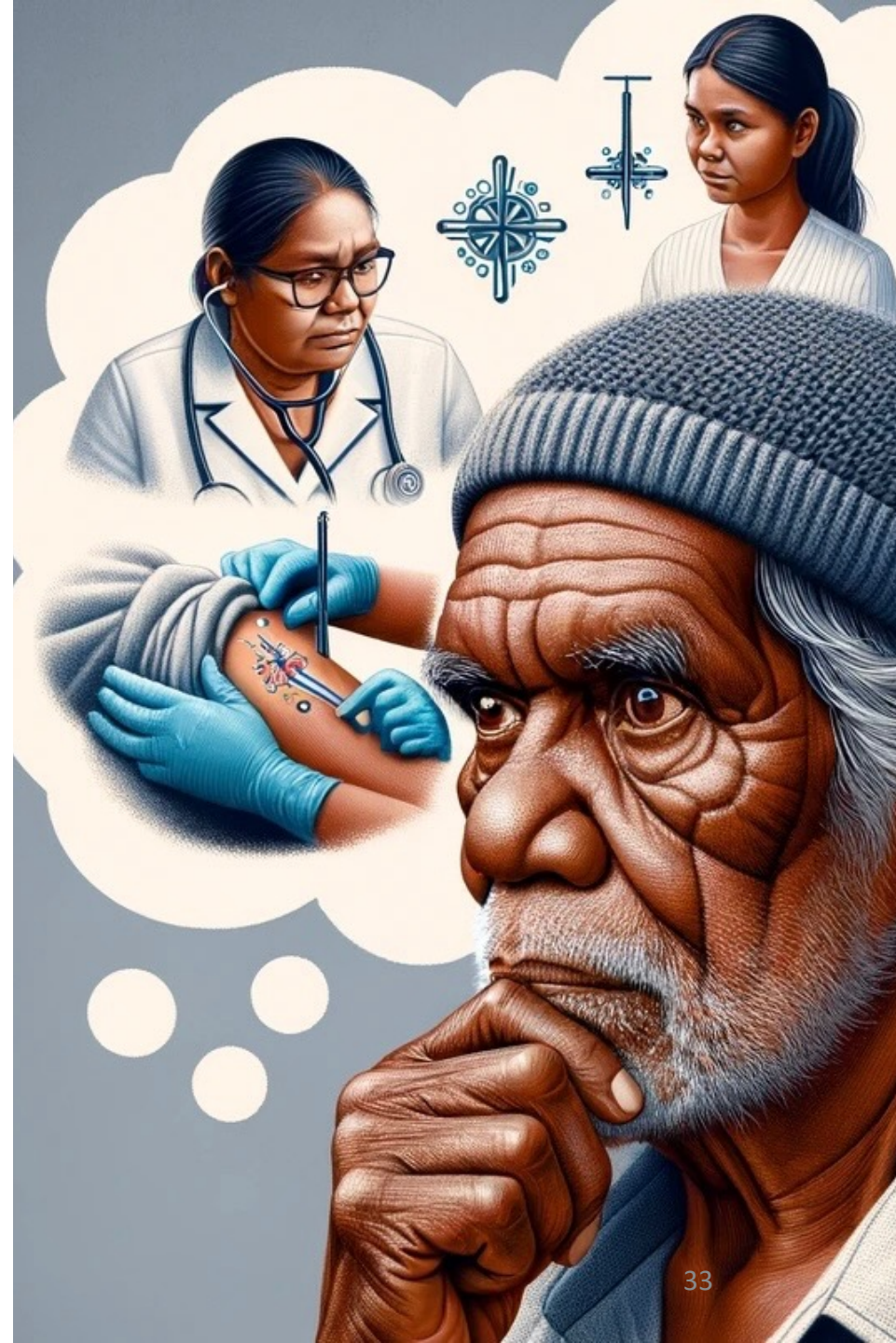
Things like

- Diabetes affecting vision
- Cataracts
- Vision getting worse because of age



# Thinking listening

- People who have hearing loss that starts early **think about what has happened in the past to understand what will happen in the present.**
- This makes it easier to cope when
  - What happened in the past is a good guide to what will happen in the present—routines.
  - Have familiar people around them





# Changes around elders

- This means changes to routines and people can be confusing, frustrating and distressing.
- **Explaining changes through giving a chance to observe them, or using visual cues to explain can help.**





# Changes in being able to think

- When someone is feeling angry or upset, it is too hard for them to think about what others are trying to say.
- Wait till they are calmer to try to explain things.



# Other changes in thinking

- Feeling **anxious, depressed, or having traumatic reactions** can also fill up someone's mind,
- This makes it harder to think clearly about what others are saying.
- **It often leads to more misunderstandings or wrongly guessing others' intentions.**



# Hearing Loss and Dementia

- Studies say that hearing loss is contributes to dementia among older people in the mainstream community.
- Because hearing loss is so much more common among First Nations elders, it is important to make sure any problems they have understanding and remembering are not about hearing loss





# Testing for dementia

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- Elders who can't hear well might find it hard understanding white fellas. Sometimes they can do more than what tests show.
- Maybe they kept quiet cause they didn't get why this white person, who they don't know, was asking lots of questions and giving them puzzles to solve.





# Speaking up

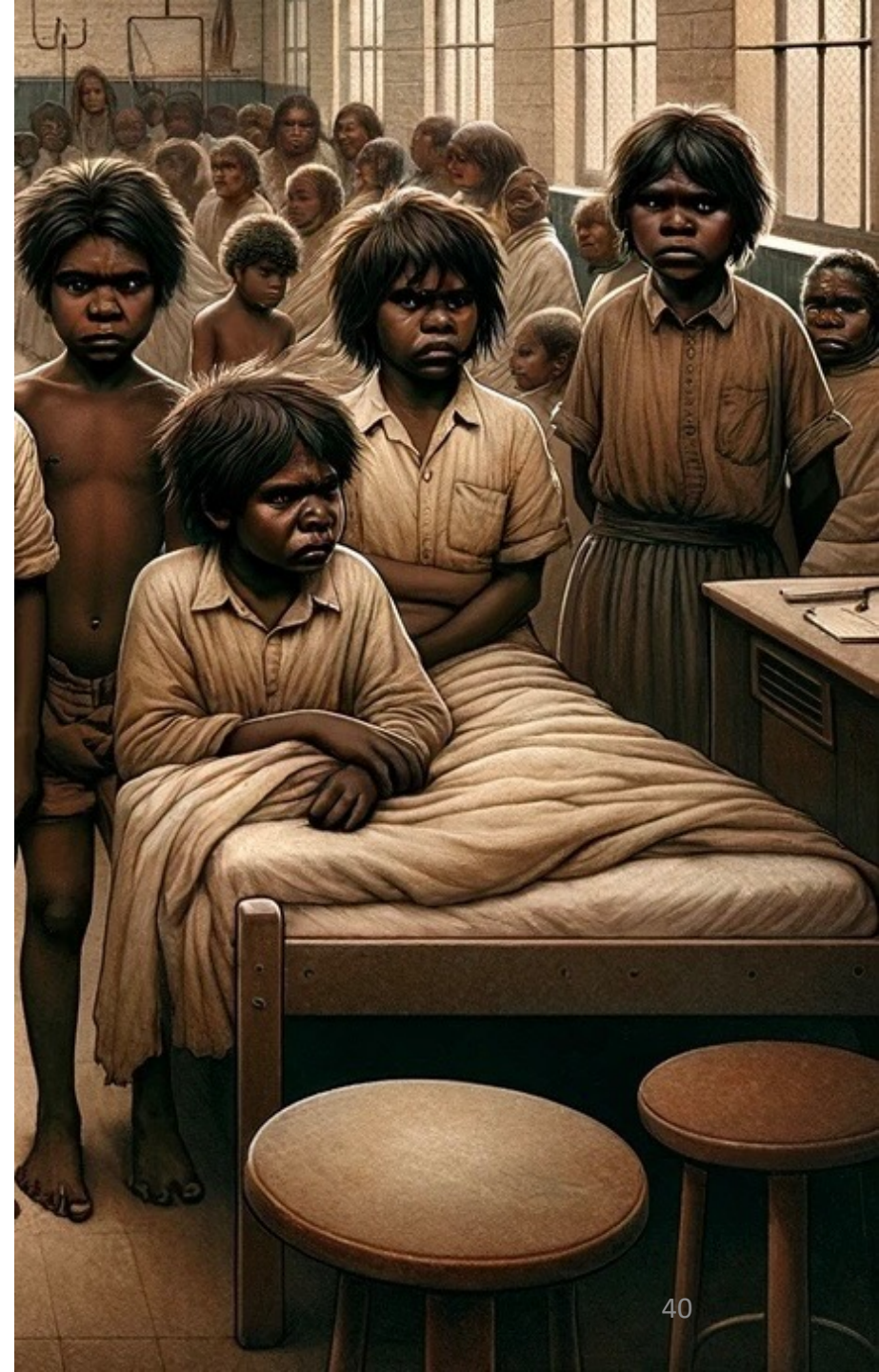
- Its important for Family and First Nations workers to speak up if that test is telling the wrong story about that Elder.





# Stolen Generation

- People from the Stolen Generation might feel reminded of bad feeling come back (trigger trauma) if they go into elder care that reminds them of places they were put when they were kids.
- Things like lots of rules and being cared for by White people



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