

'It is insidious'

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Chris and Don Guiley of A+ Hearing Center in Sun City Center.

Evidence piles up that hearing loss is far more than simply being hard of hearing.

[By Mitch Traphagen](#)

Don Guiley was once asked to consult at a geriatric facility for a man who was believed suffering from dementia. Guiley, the owner of A+ Hearing Center in Sun City Center, saw the man sitting alone and could see the isolation etched on his face. What he found, however, was that the man suffered from a severe hearing loss. Although he is not a medical doctor, Guiley didn't feel the man suffered from dementia at all. The man couldn't communicate with the world simply because he couldn't hear.

That man was fortunate in many respects. One was that Guiley discovered his hearing loss, and another was that he didn't have dementia as a result of his hearing loss.

In something that should be a concern for everyone from teenagers to octogenarians, studies are revealing that hearing loss and dementia have a distinct relationship. With hearing loss seemingly on the increase, even among young people, that does not portend well for the advancing years of millions of people. But hearing loss carries a price with it that can come long before dementia may even set in.

"What they found was the people who had even a slight hearing loss, they had dementia at twice the rate of those who had no loss," Don Guiley said.

As hearing loss worsened, so did the rate of dementia. According to Guiley, other studies have also suggested the same results.

Hearing loss has long been tied to social isolation and problems leading to clinical depression, but now it is becoming clear that the consequences of simply not being able to hear well is physically measurable. The study Guiley was referring to was conducted by Frank Lin, M.D., Ph.D. at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in conjunction with the National Institute on Aging. In results released only weeks ago, the study revealed that while the brain naturally shrinks with age, the shrinkage appears to "be fast-tracked in older adults with hearing loss." The report goes on to say that "the findings add to the growing list of health consequences associated with hearing loss, including increased risk of dementia, falls, hospitalizations, and diminished physical and mental health overall."

Lin is continuing the study to more accurately determine if the brain structural differences had occurred before or after hearing loss.

"Some of the results we won't know until 2020," Guiley said.

He can recite the findings and statistics of that and other studies from memory. It is his mission and his passion to continually learn more. It is his business, and it is a highly personal business that has the ability to impact lives. He also

suffers from hearing loss, but, of course, it has been corrected to the greatest degree possible with the latest in hearing aid technology.

“We know a person has a better quality of life if they can hear and understand conversation,” Guiley said. “There is a great deal of frustration in hearing loss. It’s not like with your eyes. You know if something is there or not. With hearing, you can’t know what you don’t hear. It is so insidious.”

Guiley possesses a remarkable and intimate knowledge of the mechanics of hearing, speech and how hearing loss works and can impact lives. He can also explain the complexities in fairly simple terms. He has the ability to put things into context.

“You have to use more of your brainpower just to understand speech,” he said of those who suffer from hearing loss. “You are using brain capacity that could be used for other things, such as memory and self-awareness. It comes at a cost.”

And it is a cost that promises only to grow.

“Only 17 percent of the people that need hearing aids are wearing hearing aids,” he said. “The biggest deterrent for people is the cost. Even for people who can easily afford them, they’ll think they are too noticeable to wear. No, you know what is noticeable? Their hearing loss. The people around you may notice that before you do because they are the ones that keep having to repeat themselves and occasionally get answers back to questions that they didn’t ask. The loss is more noticeable than the hearing aids.”

Guiley knows hearing aids aren’t inexpensive, but he says that, with only his wife and himself running their business, they work hard to keep costs down and take every measure to ensure that the instruments are available as inexpensively as possible. He also hopes that someday hearing aids will be included in health-insurance plans.

Guiley and his wife Chris are among the sponsors of an upcoming event at Sun Towers regarding hearing aids and hearing loops. The event will take place on Tuesday, March 25, at 1:30 p.m. at 101 Trinity Lakes Drive in Sun City Center. Among the topics will be the features of modern hearing aids and how hearing loops can help those with hearing loss understand important conversations. The talk will be presented by Dr. Juliette Sterkens, an audiologist and national hearing-loop advocate. The talk is also co-sponsored by Sun Towers and the Hearing Loss Association of America, Sun City Center Chapter.

Hearing loops, which allow voices to be transmitted directly into modern hearing aids, are slowly catching on in South Hillsborough, primarily in Sun City Center. Recently Publix began testing a loop at the store’s pharmacy and in one checkout aisle. Some churches are beginning to install them.

“There are a lot of places in Europe that have hearing loops — it has gotten really big over there,” Guiley said. “Pharmacies and doctors’ offices, bank tellers, places where there is really important information that people need to understand. They have them built into the buildings itself. You could take a conference table and set it up with a loop system in it with a microphone on it. When people are talking at that table, the microphone would pick up the voices and transmit it to the hearing aids of the hearing-impaired person.”

Although they are starting to appear, adoption of hearing loops seems to be slower in the U.S. than in Europe.

“I think most businesses just don’t know about it,” Guiley said.

The problem with hearing loss is that it is an invisible disability. Occasionally even the person who suffers from it isn’t the first to know — friends and family members often have to point it out.

“A lot of people think that when you have a hearing loss, everything gets quiet, but that’s not the way it works,” Guiley said.

“People start losing high frequencies; you may still hear the sound, but the brain will filter it out as noise.”

Places with echoes and lots of background noise are virtually impossible for those suffering from hearing impairment, including those who wear hearing instruments.

In my case, as a severely hearing-impaired person, even attending my local church became an exercise in frustration. Without a built-in hearing loop, the echoes inside the sanctuary allowed perhaps only one of every 20 words to be understood. My high-technology hearing aids allowed me to hear the sound, but nothing could be done to make that sound understandable.

“It’s kind of like if you have a newspaper, but don’t have enough light, you have to focus and concentrate on each word,” Guiley said. “When you finally get to the end of the sentence, you have lost the meaning of the sentence. Hearing loss is much the same thing. People can often hear but they don’t understand. When a person has a hearing loss, they have to concentrate so hard on hearing each word. It causes cognitive overload.

“There are people who go out to a restaurant, and they may spend the whole night not having a meaningful conversation. That can lead to isolation and depression. They can see what is happening to them, and they get angry, they go into seclusion. We are social animals, we need that input. But just as bad as staying home is going out and not being able to participate.”

The studies suggesting a link between dementia and hearing loss are a topic of great concern for a growing number of people, a population that now also includes a greater number of young people. But hearing loss can create problems long before dementia has a chance to set in, isolating people both young and old, in some cases limiting economic opportunities and creating emotionally and financially costly related health issues.

“We know a person has a better quality of life if they can hear and understand conversation,” Guiley said. “There is a great deal of frustration in hearing loss.”

But as a professional in hearing devices, there is also a form of satisfaction that comes from working to turn the problem around. And for most people, today’s technology means that it can be turned around.

“Every single morning when I wake up, before my feet hit the floor, I know I’m going to change someone’s life today,” Guiley said. “And I do.”

For more information about the March 25 discussion at Sun Towers, email DCaneen@SunTowersRetirement.com or call 813-892-2990.

For information about A+ Hearing Center, visit them on Facebook at [tinyurl.com/observer-aplushearing](https://www.facebook.com/tinyurl.com/observer-aplushearing).

For information about the Sun City Center chapter of the Hearing Loss Association of America, visit www.hearingloss.org/content/sun-city-center-chapter.

The Florida Telecommunications Relay Inc., a nonprofit distributor of specialized telecommunications equipment for people suffering from hearing loss, is now offering a new amplified telephone at no cost to seniors and others with hearing loss and living in Hillsborough County. For more information, call 800-222-3448 or visit www.ftri.org.

