



Restaurant Strategies for Hard of Hearing Individuals

Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons

3951 Pender Drive, Suite 130 • Fairfax, VA 22030
703-352-9055 (V) • 703-352-9056 (TTY) • 703-352-9058 (FAX)
www.nvrc.org • info@nvrc.org

Most of us love to eat out, but restaurants are not much fun if you cannot hear the waiter or your companions. We hope these strategy tips will help you relax and better enjoy your meals away from home.

Tip 1: Plan in Advance

Visit the restaurant and check for background noise, acoustics and how close the tables are to others. Sometimes even a noisy restaurant will have a table in an alcove or another place shielded from the noise; ask if you can reserve that specific table.

Tell the staff why you are checking different locations and get their advice. Try to do this when they are not rushed so they can give you the attention you need, but remember that you cannot properly evaluate a restaurant if it is nearly empty.

Tip 2: Know What to Look For

It's common sense to avoid sidewalk cafes, but don't forget that traffic noise can sometimes be heard inside a restaurant too.

Ask about busy times; it helps to eat at times when there are fewer people.

Restaurants with tablecloths, carpeting, curtains and material or panels that improve acoustics are quieter than those with hard floors, furniture, walls and high ceilings.

Look for information about quiet restaurants. Washington Post food critic Tom Sietsma gives noise ratings in his weekly dining column in The Washington Post Magazine.

Tip 3: Have Realistic Expectations

If you choose a place that features music or other entertainment, tell yourself in advance that you will concentrate on enjoying the food and the show. Plan a conversation to catch up with your dinner companions at another time.

Tip 4: Identify Your Needs

When you make a reservation, explain why you need a quiet table with good lighting. Restaurants are public accommodations which must make their premises accessible to people with disabilities, so you might consider this your “reasonable accommodation” under Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Let your friends and family know what you will need to best participate in restaurant conversations. You can give them this fact sheet, NVRC’s Communication Tips fact sheet, or both to help them enjoy being part of a pleasant dining experience.

Tip 5: Set the Stage with Your Arrival

Look for written notices of daily specials when you arrive.

Ask for a quiet table with good lighting that is a good distance from the kitchen, the restaurant entrance, a party in progress, or where there is music or live entertainment.

Choose an upholstered booth if possible. High backs on the booth with padding can make a big difference. If there are no booths, ask for a table in a quiet corner or along the side of the room. The middle of the room is usually the worst place for someone who is hard of hearing because it provides “surround sound”.

Make sure that any sunlight or bright light is behind or above you so you can best see faces to speechread and not risk tiring quickly by looking into the glare. Also consider sitting where you can’t see a TV screen; the movement on the screen can be distracting.

If needed, ask that the lights be turned up. Some restaurants turn them down for ambience. It’s unlikely that the staff or other diners will complain if you explain why better lighting is needed. Some restaurants have controls for lighting in individual areas.

Feel free to ask that music be turned down as well. It is also used for mood or to give the impression the place is full of happy customers, but music drowns out the sound of conversation. If the restaurant is resistant to turning down the music to meet your needs due to its atmosphere or popularity, consider going to another restaurant to eat – and please make sure the restaurant knows why it has lost a customer.

Select a table that will help you follow conversation. A round table is great for speechreading, but can be hard to find. Next best is a square table or oval one. Hearing well across a long, narrow table is difficult.

Pick your seat before anyone else sits down. Friends and family will learn to wait until you find the spot that gives you the best chance to participate in conversations. Sitting with your back to the wall can help, and if you have one hearing aid, you might do best sitting where the side on which its worn is facing the quietest side of the table. If you wear two hearing aids, you will have to decide what strategy works best for you.

Move any centerpieces or items on the table that block your view.

Tip 6: Make Ordering Easy

If daily specials are not posted or are not printed in the menu, ask your waiter for a written list. It will be quicker and easier for both you and the waiter. Don't try to bluff your way through a long recitation of specials. This is your meal and your money. You don't want surprises when your food arrives, or the disappointment of missing out on something you love because you didn't know it was available.

Take your time reading the menu and don't let yourself be rushed. This will help you be prepared for questions about what you prefer. You'll know the choice of breads for sandwiches, the kinds of salad dressing or vegetables to choose from, and the beverages available.

If you have trouble understanding the waiter, explain why. It's better to give a reason than have the person taking your order come up with an opinion about why you are being "difficult."

If all else fails, write notes to your waiter to avoid confusion and mistakes. Thank your waiter for any special consideration.

Tip 7: Try Different Conversation Strategies

No matter how well you plan and prepare, it may still be hard to hear the conversation. If all else fails, there's always that old standby of writing notes. But don't overlook other strategies.

A personal listening system can cut down on the background noise in the restaurant. You can try placing the microphone in the middle of the table to see if it picks up the voices of those sitting around the table. If this doesn't work, try passing the microphone around the table to whoever is speaking. NVRC staff can tell you about some options for personal listening systems.

Consider joining friends you dine with regularly to learn some basic sign language and fingerspelling. Restaurants are great places to practice your sign language. If people sign while they are talking, you get two chances to understand what they are saying. It's amazing how much fingerspelling or a few signs can help when you are stuck over a name or key phrase.

If you rely on speechreading to understand conversations, then you know you can only understand one person at a time. In a group situation it's impossible to monitor all the conversations. Try giving the benefit of your undivided attention to each person in turn. Your companions will appreciate the effort you make to be part of the conversation.

Tip 8: Practice Makes Perfect

After a while all of your strategies will become automatic. Your friends will wait while you pick the right table and seat yourself. If you are a regular customer, waiters will remember your needs and preferences. Eating out will become a comfortable and enjoyable experience. Bon appetit!

NVRC would enjoy hearing about strategies that worked for you.