

Helen

In the past I relied on hearing aids as I am profoundly Deaf. Whenever I had my hearing tested, my audiogram showed that I was just picking up low frequency sounds in the bottom left corner. I was unable to hear the decibels higher up on the audiogram, the ones that enable us to hear speech.

Using hearing aids did help me to some extent but they had their limitations. For example, I could hear when people were talking or laughing, I could hear some music, but I was unable to pick out the individual words. I could tell the difference between people talking or people laughing but I was unable to distinguish the individual words that were being spoken.

I could hear a car engine, I could pick up the sound of people's footsteps or a dog barking but I would often confuse these sounds. I would think that I had heard a dog barking but in fact it was someone hammering. I could hear the rhythm of the sound but I was not able to discriminate and pick up the individual sounds. These were the limitations I experienced throughout my life whilst using hearing aids.

I then changed to using digital hearing aids, it was very different. I'm not exactly sure how the mechanics of the digital hearing aids work but I did notice a marked difference in my hearing, I couldn't pick up things. I found it a lot harder and I felt deafer than I had before! I am a British Sign Language user and part of the Deaf community, but when I was at home with my hearing family, out and about in the hearing world, I felt much more deaf than I had ever felt before. When I was in the Deaf community I felt fine, I felt the same. Many of my friends were unaware of how I was feeling, they thought I was fine – and I was fine when I was in the Deaf community – but outside of that, I felt nervous and uncertain. I talked to other friends about the new digital hearing aids and they agreed with me, they didn't like them either.

One of my friend has a cochlear implant, they've had it for about eight years. They told me they thought cochlear implants were far better than hearing aids as they gave them access to more sounds. I asked my friend if they could give me some examples of this. On paper my friend and I have very similar hearing loss, we're both profoundly deaf and both our audiograms are pretty much the same but since having the implant my friend's audiogram no longer dips down like mine. They now have access to all the sounds across the audiogram. I couldn't believe what I was hearing but they said yes, they could hear everything and their audiogram was now a straight line. They said that they could hear everything; birds, speech, and so on. I was amazed and couldn't believe what I was hearing!

I asked them if having the cochlear implant had changed them in any way, they said that it hadn't, they were still the same and they continued to use British Sign Language. This started me thinking. I'll be honest with you, I was unsure about cochlear implants, partly because of the operation. I'd always thought why have an operation? Why not just use hearing aids? But I didn't appreciate how much more sound you can access with the implant. It really started me thinking and I decided to research things further. I went to my Audiologist and asked them to refer me to AIS.

I went through the assessment process and went ahead with the surgery. Then it came to the day of switch on, I was excited about being switched on. I had previously watched a YouTube video of someone being

switched on. They had a positive experience, they were amazed by it. I wondered if it would be the same for me. I arrived at the Implant Centre, I had been prewarned by AIS not to get my hopes up and to keep realistic expectations. I thought, okay.

I arrived at the centre, I was switched on.... I heard nothing! Nothing at all! I could feel some sensation sweeping across inside my brain but that was all. I remember thinking it was strange but thought, oh well and I left. Looking back I realise that the sensation I was experiencing was in fact sound.

I think listening through a hearing aid is a very different experience. When sound comes through a hearing aid, it feels like the aid and the brain are working together to understand and translate the sound. With the cochlear implant it didn't feel any sound going in through my ear, obviously sound was being picked up, but it was bypassing the ear and felt like it was going directly to the brain. I didn't realise that this was happening, it was amazing.

The first sounds I heard, I remember I was at home I started to experience a sensation, like a beep, beep. I experienced these beeps in my head, I remember wondering, what is it? The sound had a rhythm to it. I asked my husband what the sound was and he said it was the clock ticking. I was astounded! The tick tock of the clock, when I looked at the clock I could see the hands moving the rhythm matched the sound. I was amazed, it was incredible! The sound was loud but then quiet, I couldn't believe I was hearing it, it was incredible.

I remember the second sound that I heard I was in my bedroom practising listening to sounds on my iPad, I would listen to the speech and I had to try to identify when the speech started and ended. The sound had ended on the iPad but I was still experiencing sound in my head. I stopped what I was doing and listened carefully but the sound stopped. I continued what I was doing and the sound appeared again. What was it? I was puzzled, suddenly I realised that what I was hearing was my own breathing! I could hear the inhaling and exhaling of my breath. Yes! That was what it was. I thought, wow, that's incredible! I told my husband and he said that's great.

A few months in and I went back to have my maps adjusted and levels increased, I could hear lots more sounds. I heard my cat meow, I hadn't realised that my cat did meow! I have three cats and I didn't know that all three have distinctive individual meows, some have higher pitched cries than others, I was amazed. I found the same true of dogs, I thought all barks sounded the same but I didn't realise that they are all unique too, incredible. I was able to hear hammering, sawing, people's footsteps on different surfaces, paper rustling and crisp packets, that was an awful sound. I could pick up more and more sounds, it was fab!

As time passed I remember one time when I was driving, I was using my SatNav and I heard a clicking sound. I realised it was the SatNav making the sound of a camera clicking. It was warning me that we were entering a 30mph limit or a 50mph limit. I could hear the SatNav telling me to turn left, turn right. I could hear when I was approaching the turning and no longer missed my exit. It was fantastic! I could hear so many more sounds, it was useful.

Before I had my implant my husband had an accident, he had fallen down some steps and hurt his arm. He had been shouting me but I had not heard him, I was oblivious to his cries for help and I continued playing a game on my iPad. My husband came in later holding his arm in pain. I was shocked, what's happened? What if things had been worse, what if he had hit his head and been left there? Things could have been a lot worse. Then after having my implant I thought I could hear someone shouting, I wasn't sure if they were shouting me? I thought I could hear He...len, He...len, is that me? I thought someone was calling me so I went to check and he was calling me. I had heard my name being called and I came, it was fantastic! It was fantastic and useful too. I felt great.

I'm so happy and I have no regrets, whatsoever. I'm really pleased with my Cochlear Implant.