Dr. D'Anne Rudden: Imagine a chef trying to create a delicious dish. He has all of the ingredients to get the job done, but his kitchen is a nightmare with a stove that works half the time and a skillet that looks like it has survived the last century of wear and tear.

He may have a few spices and some stirring spoons, but that may not be enough to get the job done. Without the right tools, like a sharp knife for starters, he can't turn these raw materials into meals fit for any table.

It's the same with skill development. Your skills are your tools. If you have the right tools paired with the knowledge to incorporate them in a meaningful way, you just may have saved yourself thousands of hours of hard work that comes from simple trial and error.

Without the right skills, you will only frustrate yourself, waste your time, and spend a lot of time dealing with rudimentary issues caused by the lack of knowledge or lack of skills, as opposed to progressing in your goal.

And let's face it. We ALL want to achieve our goals and live better, more “delicious” lives.

On the podcast this month, we are truly blessed to hear from two women who are shining a light for people who might be struggling with the art of living skillfully with hearing loss.

Shari Eberts is a passionate hearing health advocate and internationally recognized author and speaker on hearing loss issues. She is the founder of Living With Hearing Loss, a popular blog and online community for people living with hearing loss and tinnitus, and executive producer of We Hear You, a ground-breaking documentary about the hearing loss experience. Shari also serves on the board of directors of the Hearing Loss Association of America.

Gael Hannan is a writer, speaker, humorist, and advocate for hearing loss issues. In addition to her weekly blog for HearingHealthMatters.org, which has an international following, Gael wrote the acclaimed book “The Way I Hear It: A Life with Hearing Loss”. She is regularly invited to present her uniquely humorous and insightful work to appreciative audiences around the world. Gael has received many awards for her work, which includes advocacy for a more inclusive society for people with hearing loss.

And NOW these two powerhouse women have teamed up to author a new book being released in May 2022 called “Hear and Beyond – Live Skillfully with Hearing Loss”.

Shari and Gael, Welcome to The Hearing Journal podcast!! Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences and wisdom with us.

03:38 Shari Eberts: Delighted to be here!

03:40 Gael Hannan: Thank you for having us.

03:42 Dr. D'Anne Rudden: Before we jump in, I have a confession to make. It wasn’t until the past few years that I figured out that you both weren’t audiologists. I hope that isn’t insulting, but you have both been staples at audiology professional conferences and your writings in journals and blogs are “must-reads” for any professional.
How did you both go from individuals navigating hearing loss to fierce advocates?

04:21 Shari Eberts: It is funny because I thought Gael was an audiologist at first, as well. The transition is a big part of my hearing loss story. I first noticed my hearing loss in my mid-20s, but the journey started when I was a child watching my father struggle with his own hearing issues. He was stigmatized by it that he would almost do anything to keep it a secret. He would sit alone at parties, grew his hair long over his ears, and even ended up isolating himself from friends, family, and everyone through the end of his life.

When I first discovered my own hearing loss, I hit it following in his own footsteps. I was embarrassed and ashamed. I didn't know why maybe because I have learned it from him, or it was a suicidal stigma I was trying to avoid.

It lasted for many years, but once I had children everything changed for me. My hearing loss is genetic, and I worry that I may have passed it on to them. I saw them watch me doing the same things I have watched my father do like hiding my hearing loss, being embarrassed by it, and laughing at jokes I haven't heard.

I realized I was passing on the stigma to another generation. I knew the cycle needed to stop. I needed to accept my hearing loss, so I did. I was inspired by them. I became determined to be an advocate for people with hearing loss, and started writing a weekly blog at livingwithhearingloss.com, and worked on a documentary during the pandemic.

I am also excited about working with Gael Hannan and other fabulous advocates on “Hear and Beyond – Live Skillfully with Hearing Loss”. I hoped that the more I share my story, I can help others live more comfortably with their own hearing issues.

06:29 Gael Hannan: I have to say that I could never have been an audiologist. Science isn't my thing. I don't even know how a hearing aid works. All I know is yell! "Open a mop! Put a battery in it and close it out, and there you go!"

I had to grow up and go to school without a hearing aid because I was born in a not-quite the dark age of hearing loss, but close. It changed in my early 20s when I switched doctors and found out I had a hearing aid in a month. It was transformational for me and life changing. For the following 20 years, I wore a succession of hearing aids because my hearing loss continued to progress downwards, but my hearing aid continued to improve upward.

Apart from that, I did not do anything else. I had no role model, I did not know anyone with hearing loss except my great-grandmother, but it didn't count. I had no advice and lived my speech reading, and bluff my way through life—but everything changed. Here again, I am sharing a similarity as if it were our children that made the difference in our lives.

I was pregnant at the age of 40 better late than never, and for the first time, my hearing loss had a different impact. I thought I was going to be a mum, and I was worried about harming my child if I could not hear him very well. Would he blow up if I don't hear him burp? How would I hear him crying in the night?

I had no resources to find myself, so I reached out for the first time to other people with hearing loss. Talking about life changing, I went to a conference with people with hearing loss in Canada. I walked in with one person, and I walked out with another person. From that point, I became an advocate. I soaked up everything about hearing loss and realized I wanted to talk about it in a way that has not been talked about previously. I started creating content—my background is in the theater creating presentations and performances that showed the
emotional impact of every aspect of hearing loss on every corner of our lives.

As I continued on, I developed tinnitus, and I got a cochlear implant five years ago. What I am saying is that my journey still continues. I don't have all the answers—it continues. I continued to learn, and the more I learn, the better I communicate.

09:18 Dr. D'Anne Rudden: Both of you had a catalyst of your children as part of it because people aren't willing to take care of something that impacts them unless it affects their children, then it becomes a different ball game. It is incredible for both to have a similar story though it is not unique.

Thank you so much I was lucky enough to get a preview copy of your book. One of the things I loved about it is the description of your new book is “Hearing Loss doesn't come with an operating manual...until now”. Was your goal to create an operating manual of sorts? Why was that such a needed addition to the information that was already out there?

10:26 Shari Eberts: It's a great question. It was part of the goal because as Gael said when people start their hearing loss journey, they don't often know other people with hearing loss. I knew my father, but he did not want to discuss it. There is a lot of information your audiologist doesn't tell you. Gael and I wasted a lot of years trying to figure it out on our own by piecing it together. What is the typical journey looked like? What are the skills we could use to make conversation easier? What kind of "attitude change" do we need that could make the conversations easier? How to make our devices work better?

We decided to consolidate all the knowledge we had pieced together and learned from other people at Hearing Loss, as well. We put it into one place to create a road map—we walked back and forth to analyze if it's a road map, a guidebook, or is it an operating manual? One of our endorsers calls it a Bible for skillful living with hearing loss which puts us under lots of pressure.

We wanted to put it in one place to make it easy for people to get the information, but it does not mean the book is a dull manual. We loaded it up with stories, our ups, and downs, our successes, our failures because our journeys are not perfect either. Some of the stories are funny—Gael is always funny. Other stories are more heart-felt, but what we hope is that everyone is going to recognize a little bit of themselves as they go through each of the pages, and walk away more skillful in terms of hearing loss.

12:13 Dr. D’Anne Rudden: Let me circle back to what you said about the beginning of your answer which is "Audiologist did not tell me everything."

Where do you see places where audiologists are falling short? As we are trying to help people with hearing loss, aren't we not telling them enough? We often feel that we gave them too much information and overwhelmed them. How do we find the balance of enough but not too much?

12:46 Shari Eberts: Being an audiologist is a tough job these days because there is so much to balance. Technology is always changing. We had a very emotional client; hearing loss is a very emotional experience in a regulatory environment. Most audiologists are trying their best, but there are some areas we think are missing.

The first phase is sharing a big picture of hearing loss, an overview of what to expect, and the typical stages along the way because if the clients do not know where they are going, then it will be hard to get there.

A good example is that most clients do not understand that hearing aids are not going to work right out of the
box. If they don’t, then we feel like a failure. We feel there is something we did not do well, but it is not the case because it is normal, it is part of the journey. Another example is that they don’t understand hearing aids are not a one-stop solution for every situation. If you are in a situation where hearing aids are not enough, then you will think it is not functioning very well. It false because it is working. You just need more skills, another attitude, and other strategies. So, these are the things I think are missing.

We talked about it in our book, the Three-Legged Stool of Critical Skills, and this is something I think audiologists spent more of their time on technology such as hearing aids or cochlear implants. They tend to forget other technologies like apps, remote mics, and other accessories, there are so many things out there now. It is important to have a broader view of technology.

The other legs are non-technical things. We call it a communication game changer. It is a way of identifying someone with hearing loss or taking a speech reading course to improve your skills. Attitude change is also an important skill to eliminate the stigma. The empowerment we deserve to hear our best, to be part of the conversation, and how we can change our attitude to make sure we are asking what we need. So, it’s a lot.

15:19 Dr. D’Anne Rudden: No. It’s not all going to happen simultaneously because it is part of the journey, but what I love in your book is all along the way you have “mind shifts” where you help people to understand how to shift their perspectives.

How does a simple reframing of thoughts about hearing loss change the game from self-limiting to empowered action?

15:56 Gael Hannan: When Shari and I started working on the book, we spent a lot of time discussing the strategies that will help make the hearing loss life livable. We quickly discovered at some point in our individual journeys in different ways, we experienced startling shift in how we thought, and what we believed about our hearing loss. It was a hard moment for us because we do not want to pass it on to our kids with the wrong attitude. Our attitude towards hearing loss had changed. Wow! Suddenly, the hearing loss itself changed.

I could not hear better than I did before, but how I operated as a person with hearing loss was better, less stress, more confidence, more success, conversations were better. It doesn’t mean all the time, going forward on every single conversation with someone, that is not how life works.

I want to give an example of a mind shift. I was at the conference 3 days ago where it was one gobsmacked after another. I was pregnant and vibrating on this amazing information. I and some new hearing loss friends decided to go out for a drink at a bar. No one else was in that little pub except for a group of four people in the corner presumably hearing people. I have to tell you that there is nothing louder on this earth for people with hearing loss who have been drinking wine. We were loud! At first, I was quite uncomfortably conscious of the looks we were getting from the people in the corner, then Boom! The moment happened that I did not care if we were loud.

This is what hearing loss is like. With the accumulation of what I have been through, and the stigma that follows. I felt the pressures off my back and realized I have been operating thinking I was then a lesser person. It somehow did a little damage and flaws, but that was all gone.

18:43 Dr. D’Anne Rudden: I think, we all have had those moments in our lives at some point with some piece of a self-limiting belief that we came to the table with. Hearing loss potentially amplifies for people who were trying to leave their lives in a way that feels authentic for them.
I am so grateful to both of you because you are willing to say out loud both to people who are potentially struggling to live with hearing loss, and to professionals whom we think we can cut down on some of the experiences you had, or limit the time it took you to get there.

It has been a quick 15 minutes for this first segment, but don’t go away because we will be back on the Aftershow, and we’ll talk deeply with Gael Hannan and Shari Eberts. Thank you so much for being here.

19:48 Shari Eberts: Thank you.

19:51 Gael Hannan: Thank you so much.

AFTERSHOW

00:44 Dr. D’Anne Rudden: We are back on The Hearing Journal Podcast Aftershow with Shari Eberts and Gael Hannan, talking all about how to live skillfully with hearing loss.

One of the topics we touched on briefly in the first part is the things beyond hearing aids because both audiologists and the people living with hearing loss get so focused on the hearing aid that we forget about all of these supporting things that can happen or could happen in conjunction with just the audibility piece with hearing aids.

Let’s talk about apps, over-the-counter tools, and accommodations that should be top of mind for professionals creating management plans for their patients. Which are your favorites? Which should be the standard of care?

02:02 Shari Eberts: For me, it is captions, captions, captions. I did not know what CART was, I had never heard of CART until I went to a hearing loss conference. It was a miracle thing that allowed me to fill in the pieces of the puzzle that I wasn’t getting through my hearing aids or through other speech reading cues.

Audiologists could do more to help promote captioning, explain what it is, and how to ask for it. There are now so many speech-to-text apps that I have on my phone, and it's like, “Okay, which one should I use today?” The otter.ai works very well, for me. It makes a confusing conversation a little bit better.

I would encourage audiologists who are using Zoom, if they’re doing any type of telehealth to make sure their meetings have captions on, so that it’s accessible. It shouldn’t be something where the client says, “Well, can you please turn on the captions.” It’s hard, especially with zoom that we need to continue advocating for ourselves all the time. The captions should be something that is readily available.

03:27 Gael Hannan: Captioning was another life-changing thing, but when I discovered the joys of telecoil—it was amazing. We love Bluetooth, but it does not have a universal application, yet. The telecoil is connected to so many things.

I remember going to HLA convention, and people with hearing loss traditionally always had to sit at the front to be close to see the person’s lips, and we don’t have to do that anymore. We can be at the back of the room and have the voice come into our ears.

I walked, I was running late for the keynote address. I slipped on the telecoil, stepped over the wire and boom, I
was flooded with sound. I stepped back and forward, nothing. Someone came over and said, "Gael, are you okay? You're like doing this little rumble with yourself here." I said, "I'm just enjoying a miracle."

Telecoil connects me to using the phone, landlines, and all other wonderful things that allow me to stream. Right now, I am talking to you D'Ann, and Shari while I'm streaming into my cochlear implant and my hearing aid. I can stream on the television. I think TV streamers are marriage-saver because we can have things that are each of our own volumes. With all of these technologies, we would love to see audiologists loop their offices, so we could say, hearing aids are great. Let's start with that, and then we'll build on it to make your life more accessible by just turning on your telecoils. Give them telecoil and then demonstrate. We get a little excited when we talk about captions and telecoil, so I hope I'm not sputtering across the airwaves here, but it's something that we feel very, very strongly about.

05:29 Dr. D'Anne Rudden: I'm a fan of captions. I think I've become a lazy television watcher because I rely on the captions even with normal hearing to pick up details that I'm distracted while I am trying to do 10 other things that I might not catch. I'm grateful to have that even in my own general life.

My conversation with Juliet Sterkens was a game-changer for me as a professional. She was such an inspiration when we did a local loop event. I got to listen to the loop as an audiologist, and I have listened to it through a hearing aid which was great. But, to have the experience of being in the looped venue, and put me in your shoes and step into it like that dance you were doing, Gael? I've had no idea how incredible that could be. I didn't know. I thought Bluetooth, and remote mics should be fine until I stepped into that loop myself. It was incredible. I can't say enough about us having experiences ourselves as well, and not just relying on people telling us what should happen. Go try it as an audiologist if you haven't already tried it.

Let's talk about speech reading. When I think about speech—reading, I think back to my master's program where we were told that it is really hard, and we won't get a lot on the lips. Audiologists have gotten away from speech reading as a strategy and teaching it like people won't do it. Tell me that people are doing it and that they would come?

07:36 Gael Hannan: Speech reading is a natural process or a process as you say in the US. It's a natural process, but it's also a skill that can be improved. People rely on visual cues without realizing it, so they're already doing it. This goes to the entire world when the pandemic started, and we were wearing masks. We know so many people consider their hearing to be difficult when they do not understand, and I know hearing aid sales have gone up because of this. We use visual information all the time.

I'm a speech-reading instructor. My passion for hearing loss advocacy was inspired. The courses, however, were held in person or even online. Speech reading is part of it, but you'll also learn how it fits into all of these other tools that you need to be doing. What's important is to be aware that you are speech reading, you learn to identify some speech movements because only half of them are visible on the lips, but your eyes—the expression, we communicate with emotion. It comes across in our eyes, facial movements, our body language, our gestures, and that's why speech reading is a wonderful training tool but can also do some lateral teaching on some of the other strategies. So again, this is something I'm extremely passionate about. It's something that you could do with small groups, and they will come for the speech reading, but they'll learn all the other stuff too.

09:27 Dr. D'Anne Rudden: I'm going to jump a little bit back to your book because there were so many juicy tidbits in the book. You guys advocate not only learning skills but how to be better communicators yourself. Talk about HEAR and “hearing hacks” we can all take advantage of. Some of these things are universal.
Shari Eberts: Absolutely. HEAR is our favorite tool. We call it the mother of all hearing hacks. It's a simple checklist that you can go through to improve any listening situation. The first step is to do the hearing check itself. Can you hear? Can you understand? If the answer is a no, then you move on to the next step. It is to evaluate and figure out what you need to improve in the listening environment. These could be things that are in the environment where there's too much background noise, or maybe it's too dim that you're not able to speech read. Other things you would evaluate would be more about the individual that you're talking to. Do they need to speak louder or slower, or maybe move their hand away from their mouth? You don't look at your different tech tools with the speech-to-text app, help here, or remote microphone—it is all about assessing the situation.

Moving on to the third step, is articulate. This is where some people fall down because you have to ask other people to change things for you, but you cannot skip this step. If you can do this in an assertive way, but not an aggressive way, then you're going to have more success. You always have to remember that your communication partners are also going to benefit if it's an easier dialogue. The last step is to revise and remind because things always change, right? Maybe a musician comes, maybe they dim the lights to make it a little more romantic, or maybe your conversation partners have just slipped back into their old patterns because it's really hard to change the way that you talk. So make sure you stand up for yourself, revise if you need to, go through the steps again, or remind your partners to apply some of the skills you've already suggested.

We feel anyone could learn this, and over time, it becomes second nature. It can improve any communication situation. So we're very passionate about that.

Dr. D'Anne Rudden: I do think people get frustrated. I hear frustrations from people coming into my office, and they'll say, "Well, I told my husband, XYZ thing I needed." They never remember, they forget, and I say to them, "I feel like almost every day we communicate poorly with the people we love the most, even hearing loss aside."

How do we change that dynamic from your perspective, and also get more comfortable with it? I always feel bad that people with hearing loss often have the burden of educating and re-educated. What do you guys think? Can we change that? Do we have hope?

Gael Hannan: We do. It helps to remember that hearing people do what they do naturally. They hear, they can't help it. They hear organically without even trying. When they make communication verbose, it's not because they're deliberately doing it, but because it's how a conversation flows organically—We communicate with emotion. Somebody said before that when you're in a relationship with someone, whether it's a parent or a child, or a partner, they have more power to hurt you because you love them, and they love you. They have the power to make you happy, but it works two ways, communication in the true sense of the word is so important.

I don't want to speak for Shari here, but in the book where she talks about how several frustrating family situations where they sat down and talked about it. From what I gather was a very highly charged discussion, but very necessary to change the rules of engagement in order to figure out how they're going to go forward. Shari is so nice to put into, she is an important part of our family. She's the mom, she's the wife.

In the same way, my husband and I have been together for a million years, and every day some little hearing-related issue comes up. Sometimes it's frustrating, but we have to deal with it. I'm not even sure if I answered your question, but in one of the mind shifts we have in the book, the common attitude is that I get angry at myself, and I get angry at others when we make communication mistakes. The mind shift is to practice communication. I forgive myself when I'm not perfect, and I am grateful for the efforts of others even when they're not perfect—that is the key. We hope this book will help people have that Shari or Gael conversation in their own lives, where they can sit
down, and give the book to their partners, or their friends, and say, “This is me. I need you to read this because you’ll understand the words they’ve put into this book. The book puts into words what I can’t. I really need you to do this because I love you, and I want to communicate with you.” The other side is they want to communicate with us.

16:00 Dr. D’Anne Rudden: Shari Eberts and Gael Hannan, you guys are rock star advocates, incredibly humble, and knowledgeable. I really appreciate you guys coming on and giving us your perspectives that I think we as audiologists need to hear more frequently so that we’re able to better meet our patients where they are along their hearing journey. Before we wrap up, tell everybody where they can get the book because this book is worth reading.

16:37 Shari Eberts: It’s available wherever books are sold, and in bookstores online. It launches on May 3rd, so we’re really hoping that it’s going to be a great read for people with hearing loss, or to their friends, their families, and the audiologist to take care of them.

16:56 Dr. D’Anne Rudden: Thank you so much for coming on the podcast this month, ladies. I will look forward to seeing you at a conference or some other blog or event near us, audiologists. Thank you.

17:11 Gael Hannan: We’ll be there and thank you so much.

17:12 Shari Eberts: Thank you.

17:14 END