

By Carolyn J. Adamski

Hear all voices

In May, as our institution began to open back up and whispers about in-person lab meetings started to float around, I panicked. In the months preceding the pandemic, I had cochlear implants surgically placed to address steadily worsening hearing loss. As I began to retrain my brain to hear—a difficult and tiring process that required me to match the new sounds I was hearing with my previous knowledge of the auditory world—we went into lockdown. Amid the isolation and uncertainty, I discovered a bright spot: Online meetings worked well for me. With everyone speaking into computer microphones, I could hear and focus. What would happen as we returned to “normal”?

My hearing loss began when I was in graduate school; no one has been able to determine the cause. At first, I naïvely thought I could overcome it with hard work and dedication. I began to record every one-on-one meeting because even with the most intense focus I just couldn't catch everything, and taking notes is not an option when you rely on lip reading. In seminars, I sat in the front row, exhausting myself as I strained to both hear the speaker and process the science. So, in the fourth year of my postdoc, I decided cochlear implants were the right next step. There was no guarantee of success, and even a best case scenario would not mean regaining “normal” hearing—hearing aids and cochlear implants can't re-create all of our ears' amazing tricks—but I had nothing to lose.

The week after I began to hear with both implants, I attended a conference. I scrutinized every listening environment to plan my equipment and where I needed to be located during each event. I attached my minimicrophone to the podium and had my poster moved to a quiet corner. It worked OK—but it was still exhausting, and I felt excluded from so much. I opted out of the valuable (and noisy) networking sessions to take the first shuttle back to my hotel, where I fell asleep instantly.

When meetings went virtual during the pandemic, my experience was much better. The sound quality on Zoom was crisp and clean, without the overwhelming ambient noises of a physical office space or meeting room. I could sit back and let the sound come to me instead of straining to hear. It was easier to focus, participate, and think deeply about the science. I began to leave seminars feeling invigorated rather than needing a nap.

With reopening on the horizon, I feared I would lose this progress. I can hear better than I could before the pandemic; I've gotten used to my implants and can now techni-



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I was tempted to accept that I wasn't going to catch everything, but I reminded myself of the relaxed experience I had on Zoom. I took a deep breath, turned to my adviser, and said, “This isn't working.” We grabbed a microphone and asked the audience to pass it around, but it still wasn't enough. By the end of the 3-hour meeting, five microphones were bouncing around the socially distanced group, and I could sit back in my chair, take in the slides, and let the audio come to me.

Now, a few weeks later, my anxiety is gradually giving way to scientific curiosity and questions enabled by feeling included and worthy of belonging. A few of my lab mates have even thanked me because they, too, were unable to hear people without microphones. Maybe instead of rushing back to “normal,” we can all take this opportunity to create environments that are more welcoming—for everyone. ■

Carolyn J. Adamski is an HHMI postdoctoral fellow at Baylor College of Medicine and the Jan and Dan Duncan Neurological Research Institute.

cally pass a hearing test. But I will always need quiet environments and microphones because I am, after all, hearing electronically.

I didn't want to be forced back into hustling to comprehend. So, with my stomach clenched with anxiety, I set up a meeting with my adviser to make a hearing plan for our lab meetings. I did not want to distract or burden my 30 lab mates, so the simplest solution seemed to be to ask the presenter to use a microphone and repeat audience questions before answering them.

Initially, it went OK. But as the presentation gave way to lengthy technical questions and in-depth discussion, the system broke down. I found myself leaning forward, my neck tensed as I turned back and forth from speaker to audience, straining to hear.

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