



Karen Anderson

## If you're having trouble hearing, just do what I do: ask 'when?'

*Club Columnist Karen Anderson has noticed that a lot of households are having trouble communicating these days. After some experimenting, she's ready to share a solution that's working for her.*

Based on an extensive survey I've conducted in the past week, the most common words in the modern English language are "What?" and "Huh?"

That's because we're surrounded by so much noise and distraction these days that we rarely hear, much less comprehend, anything anyone says to us. To indicate that we've recognized someone's attempts at communication, and are interested in finding out what they're trying to say, we respond, "What?" and peer anxiously in their direction. To indicate that we know they're out there somewhere but we'd rather not hear about it, we grunt "Huh?" and keep playing with our smartphones.

It doesn't help, of course, that at the same time the noise levels around us are rising, our own hearing abilities are going rapidly down hill.

I'm from the generation whose hearing was supposedly ruined by rock concerts. (I attended about 20 of them before rock concerts were in turn ruined by heavy metal bands.) Subsequent generations have been able to wreck their hearing much less expensively using just a simple pair of \$10 earphones and the volume controls on an iPod.

Listening to the Rolling Stones and Janis Joplin was great, but now I'm paying the price. If I'm in the kitchen with the dishwasher running, I can't tell if you're complimenting me on my new haircut or informing me that the next door neighbor just backed over our mailbox.

My ex-husband was a trial attorney accustomed to projecting his voice in a courtroom, so for a long time I didn't notice my hearing loss. But the Scholarly Gentleman has a mellow, gentle voice I can barely hear from the next room.

Our relationship was briefly in jeopardy when, for some perverse reason, every time I turned on the water to

do dishes, he'd suddenly start talking to me – from the other end of the house.

"Mumble mumble mumble," I'd hear him say. "Mumblety mumblety mumph?"

I'd turn off the water, dry my wet soapy hands and yell, "What?" with considerable annoyance. The poor man couldn't figure out why I was suddenly snarling at him.

It was only after several of these frustrating episodes that I realized the Scholarly Gentleman, also of the concert generation, couldn't hear that I'd turned on the water to do dishes. He imagined that I was peacefully peeling carrots or working quietly at my desk.

Most couples of our vintage report similar communications problems, but have you noticed that the 20-somethings and teenagers have it solved? They never attempt to shout to each above the racket of espresso machines, dishwashers or rock bands. They just text.

So we gave texting a try. Unfortunately, it turns out that the reasons texting works so well for teenagers is that they don't wash dishes or anything else that requires them to let go of their smartphones.

As a last resort, I asked the Scholarly Gentleman to assume I can't hear him and to come into a room to address me. But when we tried it, the results were quite different from what I'd expected.

The Scholarly Gentleman's version of what happened is that he entered the kitchen, saw me rinsing dishes, figured I wouldn't be able to hear, so walked right up beside me before speaking.

My recollection of the incident is that I was completely alone in the kitchen, peacefully rinsing a pot lid, when a voice six inches from my ear bellowed, "Karen!"

"Gaaaaah!" I screamed, leaping into the air and flinging the dripping lid into the dining room.

After we coaxed the cats out from under the buffet and picked up the dented pot lid, we rethought our strategy. We decided to just go back to the original mumbling.

Now when I'm washing dishes and the Scholarly Gentleman says, "Mumble mumble mumble ... mumblety mumblety mumph?" I translate it as, "You've been working so hard, want to go out for ice cream?"

And instead of "What?" I yell, "When?"

