Aural Rehabilitation
Why It’s Important
By Melanie Duldulao and Robin Ramsey

Research indicates that practices offering aural rehabilitation (AR) tend to have higher rates of hearing aid satisfaction, along with fewer hearing aids returned for credit (Kochkin, 1999). AR is an important aspect of treating a patient with hearing loss; however, it is often overlooked by the hearing health-care provider, as much of the emphasis of treating individuals with hearing loss focuses on the technology of the device rather than rehabilitation. While technology does play a large and important role, aural rehabilitation is still necessary and vital in increasing patient satisfaction. Despite exciting and rapidly advancing developments, technology alone often is not enough to address a patient’s hearing needs.

The use of AR can be likened to the repair of a broken arm in which surgical treatment is provided to repair the damage. Once the medical and surgical treatment is completed, it is still important to exercise the arm to achieve maximum recovery. Just as we provide hearing aid technology as treatment of hearing loss, the brain still needs to be “exercised” to maximize the benefit received.

In addition to demonstrating lower hearing aid returns and better outcomes (Kochkin, 1999), another advantage of AR is that it requires the patient to be an active participant in his or her own care, treatment, and eventual success. Patients are encouraged and guided to learn management strategies that can empower them to advocate for themselves. Aural rehabilitation addresses the patient as a whole, which includes active input and collaboration. Incorporating AR into a hearing aid fitting allows audiologists to offer a customized, patient-centered approach to obtaining amplification. This collaboration can improve the patient’s satisfaction with hearing aids.

AR also has the potential to emphasize audiology from other hearing service professionals because it positions the audiologist to look at the patient as a whole entity beyond the prism of technology. In a competitive market of “big box” stores and hearing aids delivered over the Internet, the ability to offer AR provides the audiology professional with an opportunity to remain relevant and viable while better serving patients. As sales over the Internet have the potential to grow, so does the potential of dissatisfaction. The Internet is not an ideal forum for hearing aid candidates to discuss issues related to their hearing loss and it lacks personal contact with a knowledgeable professional best able to provide assistance beyond the technology.

The training of an audiologist provides the knowledge to address the patient’s unique hearing needs along with the psychosocial aspects related
Aural rehabilitation has become a more streamlined service to offer, with an increasing number of affordable and customizable treatment options with the advancement of the Internet, computers, and tablets. AR is often viewed as financially limiting in the confines of most practices. However, using new AR delivery models can provide a cost-effective opportunity to incorporate AR into your practice.

Some clinicians prefer a traditional style of AR that involves direct, in-person patient contact. A cost-effective alternative to this option is a group workshop. This eliminates the time spent on individual programs and it allows this service to be provided in a group environment. A group dynamic also offers the opportunity for patients to provide support to each other and discuss their relevant experiences. Multiple participants will also allow the program to be offered at a lower cost to the individual patient. If you choose to offer individual or group sessions, remember these should be provided on a fee-for-service schedule as appropriate.

Consider supplementing formal programs with informal AR exercises as well. Melissa Heche, AuD, from New York Speech and Hearing, Inc., reported that she provides exercises that are tailored to the patient’s needs, lifestyle, and experiences. An example of this includes a therapy in which she introduces music (sometimes using specific notes on a piano), infiltrates environmental noises, and asks the patient to perform and actively listen to a variety of phonemic exercises.

One of the more popular types of AR that has been increasing in visibility is the LACE (Listening and Communication Enhancement) program. LACE is a computer-based software that allows patients to complete the training at home on their own time. As a way to increase participation, some clinics have chosen to include the LACE program as part of a complete hearing rehabilitation package bundled into the cost of the hearing aids and service. Some clinics will offer the program as an additional option to purchase. The advantage of incorporating the LACE into your program is that it helps reinforce the notion that the rehabilitation process consists of several components. The hearing aid serves as the tool to provide access to sound, and AR is the exercise used with the tool to maximize auditory processing. Offering LACE as part of the program eliminates the need for patients to “choose” to participate, and it simply becomes part of the process.

Patients can be registered for LACE at the time of the hearing aid evaluation or at the time of the fitting. Getting registered is the first step toward participation. The actual sessions can then be initiated either at the time of the fitting or several weeks after they have worn their hearing aids.

The program should be monitored to ensure follow-through. Audiologists, assistants, or staff can conduct follow-up calls to the patient. Progress can also be tracked online, allowing for continued contact with patients regarding their training at follow-up appointments. This also provides an opportunity to provide reminders to continue or start sessions. Some clinics will offer incentives such as free batteries to complete a set amount of LACE sessions within a certain time period.

There are also alternatives to LACE. Some manufacturers have developed programs that can be used in the office or at home. This includes Starkey’s Hear Coach app currently available for use on Mac-supported devices, including iPhones/iPads, and is also available on Android-supported technologies. This may be a great option for your more technologically savvy clients and will give them the opportunity to complete their AR on the go.

As discussed in this article, the importance of incorporating AR into our daily practice is evident, and there are ways to make it more cost-effective. AR can be used in any clinic environment with delegation and practice, and we should all be making an attempt to incorporate this service to maximize our patient’s success. Not every patient may be inclined to participate in AR, but at the very least our patients should be counseled regarding the important role it plays in their success, and it should be provided as an option. ☺

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Illustration by Johanna van der Sterre.

References