

**Safe
Listening
Snapshot:
Beyond
Volume**

**Reframing sound
habits to include
self-care for wellbeing
and hearing health**

Our Gratitude

Deafness Forum Australia warmly thanks everyone who shared their time, experiences, and insights. Your contributions were vital in shaping healthier listening habits and preventing hearing loss across our communities.

About Deafness Forum Australia

As the national, independent peak body for Australians living with deafness, Deafness, or hearing loss, Deafness Forum Australia advocates for hearing health and wellbeing to be recognised as national priorities—so every Australian can thrive and participate fully in society.

About the Author

Jane Lee, National Director of Hearing Health at Deafness Forum Australia, holds advanced degrees in Bioethics and Public Health (specialising in climate and environment) and a Bachelor of Science in Sociology/Anthropology. With a strong background in health equity advocacy across disability, women's health, mental health, CALD communities, and environmental health, Jane believes inclusive systems underpin healthier communities.

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Deafness Forum Australia

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we live and work. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Deafness Forum Australia is based on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country. As a national peak body, we recognise that our members and the communities we represent are located on many different Countries across this land.





“I pay attention to whatever I can hear because it has a way to sink into my life—it has a way to impact me either positively or negatively.”

Why This Snapshot?

'Safe listening' has been an ongoing global initiative to curb rising hearing loss due to unsafe recreational practices.

This snapshot explores how some young Australians may engage with sound through emotion, identity, and self-care. It considers how traditional messaging may be reframed to include safe listening as a positive act of self-care.



Quick Snapshot: Key Insights

INSIGHT	WHY IT MATTERS
Safe Listening is Self-Care	Safe listening can be considered a form of self-care—alongside rest, mindfulness, and emotional regulation. Sound can influence feelings as well as hearing. By going beyond just talking about hearing loss prevention and including overall wellbeing, we may help more people make safe listening a habit—and that may actually do more to reduce hearing loss in the long run.
Risk Messaging Still Matters	Existing messages about potential risks remain important and may be more effective when balanced with wellbeing-focused messaging.
Control Builds Confidence	Tools like captions, volume limits, and noise-cancelling headphones may empower individuals to shape their listening environments.
Barriers Go Beyond Volume	Potential harm may arise not only from noise but also social pressures, stigma, and overstimulation; addressing these factors may support safer listening habits.
Emotion Drives Habit	Many young people may already use sound to calm, focus, or connect; linking this to hearing health may enhance relevance and motivation.

What Is Safe Listening— And Why Rethink It?

Safe listening has mostly focused on reducing sound-related recreational hearing loss through messaging around managing intensity (loudness) of sound, duration and frequency of exposure.¹

Safe listening as a specific health promotion framework generally does not address all forms of noise-induced-hearing loss (NIHL), such as in work environments. However, safe listening practices and building good habits can extend outside recreational sound settings. Additionally there is growing use of “safe listening” more broadly to promote good listening habits in other sound and noise environments.

Currently, over 1 billion young people worldwide may be at risk of sound-related recreational activities.² This means, nearly 1 in 2 are at risk of hearing loss due to unsafe listening, estimates suggest 50% of young people are exposed to unsafe sound levels from personal devices, and 40% through entertainment venues.³

While traditional safe listening campaigns have been important, evidence about their long-term effectiveness is limited, and rates of hearing loss continue to rise.

Traditional campaigns have often relied on fear-based, rule-oriented messages, like: “Don’t turn it up too loud!,” “Limit your noise exposure!,” or “Protect your hearing before it’s too late!”

Fear-based messaging may be effective when threats feel immediate, but many young people may perceive hearing loss as a distant or aging-related issue, which can reduce the impact of such messages.

Existing approaches remain relevant but may benefit from being complemented by messages that emphasise agency, identity, and emotional wellbeing—not solely avoidance of harm.

This snapshot explores the idea that ‘safe listening’ may also be reframed to include an understanding that it is, itself, a form of ‘self-care’ and not done in addition to self-care.

What We Did

We conducted online focus groups with 14 Australians aged 21–33 to explore real-world sound habits, what supports positive listening and what challenges may exist.

Who Participated?

14



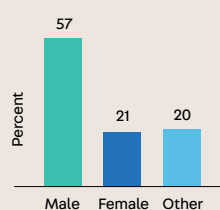
PARTICIPANTS

Average age 26

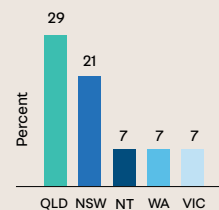
36%



IDENTIFIED AS deaf, Deaf, hard of hearing, or having hearing loss⁴



IDENTIFIED AS
Male 57%
Female 21%



GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

71% identified as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)

36% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

1. World Health Organization, Making Listening Safe, <https://www.who.int/activities/making-listening-safe>.
 2. Lauren K. Dillard et al., “Prevalence and Global Estimates of Unsafe Listening Practices in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *BMJ Global Health* 7, no. 11 (November 2022): e010501, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2022-010501>
 3. World Health Organization, “1.1 Billion People at Risk of Hearing Loss,” World Health Organization, March 10, 2015, <https://www.who.int/vietnam/news/detail/10-03-2015-1.1-billion-people-at-risk-of-hearing-loss>.
 4. Our work spans public health and disability advocacy, so we use inclusive terms that reflect both clinical and cultural experiences. Deaf (capital D) refers to people who identify as culturally Deaf. deaf (lowercase d) refers to the audiological condition of hearing loss. Hard of Hearing (HoH) describes a range of hearing loss. Hearing loss is used broadly in public health. The use of “d/Deaf” is an accepted convention recognising the overlap between identities, without privileging one more. People may identify with one, all, or none of these. We respect each person’s choice.

Community Voices: Sound as Experience, Not Just Noise.

Participants described sound as an emotional and sensory experience influencing how they feel, cope, focus, and connect.

These shared stories reveal patterns such as sensory fatigue and a desire for control in sound environments—relating to self-care.

**“Sound has a way of settling me—
or overwhelming me. It depends
on how much control I have.”**



What We Found: Seven Intersecting Domains

From our sessions, seven domains emerged that shape how young people engage with sound:

1. Awareness
2. Tools
3. Behaviour change
4. Motivation
5. Barriers
6. Enablers
7. Messaging

Key Insights & Domains

1.

AWARENESS

Hearing loss is often invisible. Relatable, story driven education may help make risks feel more real.

"Hearing loss can be a silent issue, so hearing real experiences can make the risks more relatable."

"I missed out on a very important message during a conversation because of a noisy environment."

"Sound has impacted my life in everyday living. We can't do without sound, we can't do without listening, we can't do without hearing."

2.

TOOLS

Tools like volume limits, captions, noise-cancelling headphones, and sensory-friendly spaces may support safer listening.

"I use noise-cancelling headphones in loud environments to stay focused or calm."

"I keep captions on for all videos, and I set visual alerts for messages when my phone is on silent."

"I use a mindfulness app with soundscapes like rain or ocean waves—they help block out background noise and keep me relaxed."

3.

BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Many participants reported already adapting behaviours—lowering volume, taking breaks, or seeking calm spaces for mental wellbeing.

"It started out unconsciously... till I made it a routine... so now it's part of me."

"Even though I have hearing aids, I can only hear loud sounds, and they can still make me feel sick."

"After long Zoom calls, music sessions, or noisy environments, I take breaks in silence to rest my ears."



4.

MOTIVATION

Emotional wellbeing, rather than fear, often appears to motivate sustainable listening behaviours.

“Soft music helps me feel peaceful, but loud or unexpected sounds make me feel anxious or overwhelmed.”

“Uplifting music, comedy, positive vibes—that helps mood and makes it easier to engage.”

“Anything loud... gives me a headache. So I try to make sure the sound I’m listening to is of low volume.”

“Any time I feel depressed or worried, or when I need to focus, I listen to music. It enhances my memory recall...”

5.

BARRIERS

Sensory overload, stigma, and social pressures can limit the ability to make safer listening choices.

“Crowded halls feel like being in a tin of sardines... it’s exhausting.”

“Listening becomes tiring when the other person gets louder because they think that’s how I hear them better.”

“I feel irritated whenever I hear loud noises, such as horns and loud shouts.”

6.

ENABLERS

Having control and customisation options may help maintain healthy listening habits

“I ask people to turn down the volume if I feel like I’m getting a headache.”

“I developed a strategy... I don’t use headphones for long periods. I play the music out loud so I don’t get headaches.”


7.

MESSAGING

Simple, clear tips and personal stories may be more engaging than technical warnings

“Simple tips, not lectures.”

“Sharing personal stories about hearing loss – people are more likely to take action when they understand the risks.”



“Music or sounds that are depressing, mean, or nasty... I take that on and really feel it strong.”

Evolving “Safe” to include “Self”

Many young people may not strongly identify with ‘safe listening’ or hearing loss prevention messages, but they do relate to messaging around emotional calm, regulation, and control.

Many already manage their sound exposure in ways that align with safe listening practices – not to explicitly prevent hearing loss, but to support their mental wellbeing and self-care.

So, if young people are engaging in safe listening practices, you might wonder, why are hearing loss rates still rising?

This is potentially because current efforts may be insufficient or incomplete, because young people may be approaching it as self-care, but may not fully understand how to protect their hearing effectively.



Young people often manage sound in ways that align with safe listening practices—though they may not realise it, as their motivation is self-care:



Choosing calming environments



Using noise-cancelling headphones



Listening to lo-fi music or ambient sounds for focus

Still, even with these good habits, there can be gaps in understanding how to practice safe listening that fully protects hearing. For example, some individuals may:

- Use protective tools but still be exposed to potentially harmful volume levels.
- Seek calm but may not fully understand how sound intensity, duration and frequency impact hearing.
- Prioritise emotional wellbeing but lack social or environmental support to maintain safe listening in venues or other external environments.

Reframing safe listening to include self-care builds on positive habits with a smarter, more structured approach.

Reframing, Not Replacing

This approach does not replace existing messages or ignore broader systemic factors. It recognises that:

- Urban planning, inclusive policies, guidelines, standards, and accessible technology are important.
- Medical and technical prevention strategies remain valuable.
- Risks associated with unsafe listening should continue to be communicated.
- No single approach can fully resolve sound-related recreational hearing loss.

Instead, this reframing complements existing strategies with a human-centred, emotionally grounded focus on the individual.

By framing safe listening as both ear protection and self-care:

- People may better recognise and name the practice.
- The benefits may feel more immediate and relevant.
- Individuals may be more likely to sustain positive behaviours with appropriate support.

While the focus in this snapshot is on Gen Z (aged 12–27), the approach may also resonate with other age groups.

What Sets This Apart

Many safe listening campaigns are moving toward more empowering language, but most still lean on risk, consequence, and restriction. Some mention self-care alongside safe listening, but few, if any, clearly define safe listening, itself, as a form of self-care.

This approach shifts the narrative:

- From fear to feelings
- From avoidance to agency
- From protection to personal wellbeing

Since young people already use sound to manage emotions and stress, linking these behaviours to hearing health may support lasting positive change.

Why This Framing Works:



It's inclusive

Traditional hearing loss prevention messaging can unintentionally exclude those who already live with hearing loss. A self-care framing recognises that it isn't just about hearing loss, it is also about healthy brains and invites all to participate—whether for mental health, reducing sensory overload, improving cognitive focus, or other self-care reasons.

By embracing a self-care approach, we not only make hearing health more inclusive and relevant to everyone – but we also help stem the rise of preventable hearing loss for future generations.



It's empowering

It's not about what not to do—it's about how to do it better in a way that gives people a sense of control and autonomy. This narrative aligns with young people's values around identity, boundaries, and wellbeing.



It's practical

We're not asking for big behaviour shifts. We're helping people do what they already do—more intentionally, more strategically, and hopefully, with better outcomes.



It's sustainable

Positive behaviours are more likely to stick when they're tied to immediate emotional rewards.⁵ Calm, clarity, and comfort help build habit loops.⁶

In Short

How we listen affects how we feel. And how we feel can help us change how we listen.

5. Philippa Lally et al., "How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no. 6 (2010): 998–1009, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3505409/>.

6. Wyatt, Zoe. 2024. "The Neuroscience of Habit Formation." *Neurology & Neuroscience* 5 (1): 003. <https://doi.org/10.33425/2692-7918.1063>.

What We Recommend

1. Reframe Safe Listening as also Self-Care

Shift the focus from just risk to include agency. Safe listening is more than just protection—it's a form of self-care that supports how we feel, think, and connect. Like rest or mindfulness, it's a daily choice that helps us stay grounded, present, and well.

2. Blend Risk with Wellbeing Messaging

Keep using risk-based messages—but complement them with emotionally motivated messages about calm, focus, control, and clarity for better impact.

3. Make Control Tools the Norm

Ensure tools like captions, volume limits, noise-cancelling headphones, and quiet spaces are widely available and standard across public, work, and digital environments.

4. Break Social and Emotional Barriers

Address stigma, sensory overload, and social pressure. Support self-care sound choices by normalising inclusive behaviours – like using hearing aids, respecting “quiet” requests, or creating sensory-aware spaces.

5. Make Healthy Listening Joyful

Support venues, events, and media creators to design sound experiences that feel good and safe. Emphasise enjoyment and emotional connection, not just risk avoidance.



**Celebrate
safe listening
as emotional
wellbeing and
mental clarity—
alongside rest,
mindfulness,
and self-care.**

Additional Resources

Explore the Safe Listening Action Plan and more resources at:
www.deafnessforum.org.au

About This Snapshot

This publication aims to share general information and raise awareness about safe listening. It's not a substitute for professional medical, psychological, audiological, legal, or other advice. If you have concerns about your health or hearing please speak with a qualified professional who can offer guidance specific to you.

Any suggestions in this report are not guarantees of preventing hearing loss, improving mental health, or achieving specific outcomes—everyone's experience is different, and results may vary based on personal and environmental factors.

The insights shared here come from qualitative data gathered from a small, self-selected group and should be understood in that context. Quotes reflect individual experiences and opinions, not universal truths or endorsements. Mention of specific tools or products does not imply endorsement. Always consult a qualified professional for personalised advice.