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## **Barriers and facilitators to asking adults with hearing loss about their emotional and psychological well-being: a COM-B analysis**

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## **Abstract**

*Objective:* To explore the barriers and facilitators faced by hearing healthcare clinicians (HHCs) with respect to asking adults with hearing loss (HL) about their emotional well-being.

*Design:* This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups. The interview topic guide was developed based on the COM-B model.

*Study sample:* Fifteen HHCs of a single hearing services organisation in Western Australia across 13 clinic locations participated.

*Results:* Barriers and facilitators that may influence HHCs' behaviour of routinely asking adults about their emotional well-being include having the knowledge and skills to ask about emotional well-being, forgetting to ask, awareness of the emotional impacts of HL, time and tools for asking, clients' reactions to being asked, supportive peers, normalisation of discussions relating to emotional well-being, presence of significant others, emotions associated with asking, being in the habit of asking, reminders, beliefs about consequences and confidence or capabilities, and scope of audiology practice.

*Conclusions:* Application of the COM-B model identified barriers in capabilities (e.g. knowledge), opportunities (e.g. tools), and motivation (e.g. beliefs about benefits of asking about emotions) that need to be addressed for HHCs to ask their clients about their emotional well-being.

**Keywords:** COM-B model; mental health; emotional well-being; behaviour change

## **Introduction**

Hearing loss can be emotionally distressing for adults, causing feelings of frustration, embarrassment, inferiority and loneliness<sup>1,2</sup>. However, individuals often do not seek help for their distress due to the social stigma associated with emotional and psychological health<sup>3-5</sup>. Adults with hearing loss may develop long-term relationships with their hearing healthcare clinicians (HHCs), to whom they may disclose their emotional experiences associated with hearing difficulties<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, HHCs could provide emotional support (e.g., providing information on and delivering therapeutic interventions for mental well-being) to adults with hearing loss. Yet, research shows that the majority of HHCs do not routinely provide

emotional support in the audiology setting<sup>7-10</sup>. Interventional research is needed to help HHCs better address the emotional impacts of hearing loss within routine care.

While the majority of HHCs offer little emotional support<sup>10, 11</sup>, those who do, employ approaches such as exploration of psychosocial impacts of hearing loss, development of personalised goals, involvement of significant others in the rehabilitation program, and promotion of self-management strategies<sup>10, 12</sup>. In addition, HHCs may provide emotional support, incorporating emotion-focussed counselling skills, therapeutic counselling techniques, and recommendation/referral for additional support outside of the audiology setting (e.g., a psychologist)<sup>10</sup>. Emotion-focussed counselling is described by HHCs to include active listening to encourage dialogue, asking questions to further explore the emotional condition, expressing concern for clients' well-being, use of client-centred communication, expressing empathy, acknowledging and validating the clients' emotions, and making time and space for conversations about the client's emotional state<sup>10</sup>.

The majority of HHCs do not routinely provide emotional support<sup>7-10</sup>, self-reporting barriers to include feeling under-skilled, lack of training, worry that they may get out of their depth, time/caseload pressures and lack of clarity regarding their role and responsibilities<sup>7</sup>. A recent systematic review demonstrates similar barriers for GPs to initiate conversations with clients about emotional distress symptoms<sup>13</sup>. This review also demonstrates that GPs clinical behaviours for providing emotional support can be improved through addressing barriers related to GPs' skills relating to asking about, exploring, explaining, and negotiating or guiding patients towards new understandings relating to their emotional distress; and upfront provision of information to assist management of expectations about recovery and improve engagement in treatment<sup>13</sup>.

Given that recent research suggests that HHCs may not routinely provide emotional support to adults with hearing loss<sup>10, 11</sup>, we aimed to develop an intervention to increase the emotional support provided in audiology clinics. Interventions to improve clinical services depend on changing the behaviour of the health professionals delivering the services<sup>14</sup>. The COM-B model of behaviour change recognises that barriers and facilitators of behaviour change may relate to Capability (i.e., strengths, skills, and knowledge for performing a behaviour), Opportunity (i.e., accessible and acceptable social and physical environment for the behaviour to occur), or Motivation (i.e., reflective and automatic motivations to do the behaviour) (see Supplementary Figure 1). The COM-B model proposes that if a behaviour is

not taking place, barriers in one or more of these areas need to be addressed. The COM-B model is widely used in the healthcare setting<sup>15-17</sup>, including in audiology research<sup>18-20</sup>.

In the previous phase of the broader project, we explored potential opportunities for developing a behavioural intervention aimed at improving emotional support<sup>21</sup>. Participants (HHCs, clinic receptionists and managers, adults with hearing loss and their significant others) identified three behaviours to be the most promising within the audiology setting, including the HHCs (1) asking about, (2) providing information on, and (3) delivering therapeutic intervention for emotional well-being. In the previous phase, participating adults with hearing loss and significant others specifically expressed a desire for HHCs to step into the role of counsellor and directly ask clients about how their hearing loss is impacting their emotional well-being. They emphasised that increasing the frequency with which HHCs ask about their emotional well-being would increase the likelihood that clients would receive timely and appropriate treatment<sup>21</sup>. Literature also suggests that skills related to asking about mental health could be a factor influencing GPs' communication about emotional concerns<sup>13</sup>, and there is a relationship between the ability to detect emotional disorders and the ability to give information and advice about treatment options<sup>22</sup>. However, no study explored factors influencing HHCs for asking about the emotional well-being of adults with hearing loss.

This study, therefore, aimed to use the COM-B model to explore the barriers and facilitators faced by HHCs for routinely asking adults with hearing loss about their emotional well-being (promising behaviour 1 identified within the previous study<sup>21</sup>). The outputs of this qualitative study will inform the development of an intervention to improve how HHCs provide emotional support within audiology consultations, including *asking* about emotional well-being.

## **Materials and Methods**

This qualitative study was guided by the COM-B model for behaviour change<sup>14</sup> (see Supplementary Topic Guide) and conducted using semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups with HHCs.

### ***Participants***

All participants were recruited through a single hearing services organisation in Western Australia across 13 clinic locations. The HHCs met the inclusion criteria to participate in this study if they were at least 18 years of age, able to communicate verbally, and could speak

fluent English. In total, 15 HHCs (13 females and 2 males) participated, ranging in age from 25 to 53 years (mean 35.2, SD 10.0). Participants had between 2 and 25 years of clinical experience (mean 9.3, SD 7.6).

### ***Procedure***

Approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Office of The University of Western Australia (RA/4/20/5873). All HHCs employed by the partner clinic were invited to participate via email, provided with an information sheet and consent form, and presented with different time options in May 2020. All interviews were conducted by the last author (R.J.B.), a white woman born in Australia. At the time of the study, R.J.B. had extensive clinical audiology experience and was working as a postdoctoral researcher, with a focus on the social and emotional impacts of hearing loss. R.J.B. completed a Graduate Diploma in Counselling in 2011 and approached the research with the assumption that HHCs have the capacity to provide psychosocial support to their adult clients. As the interviews were conducted during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the sessions were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams, which HHCs were familiar with, to facilitate physical distancing. Eight interview sessions were conducted; six were conducted one-on-one, two of them with a group of two, and one with a group of five. Each participant attended only one session. The session with the group of five lasted for 1.5 hours, and all other sessions lasted one hour, except for one interview that took 30 minutes. All sessions were audio- and video-recorded. We reflected after each of the interviews and refined the topic guide where necessary. Data collection continued until no new data emerged from the interviews and data saturation was achieved.

### ***Data analysis***

Audio recordings were transcribed by a professional service (with identifying information removed), de-identified, and entered into Microsoft Excel for analysis. Framework analysis<sup>23</sup> was used to deductively analyse the transcripts using a matrix to reduce and explain the data. The matrix developed for this study included the three main domains of the COM-B model and their sub-domains (Capability: Physical and Psychological; Opportunity: Social and Physical; and Motivation: Reflexive and Automatic). Three members of the research team conducted the analysis together to optimise rigour and trustworthiness. In Round 1, two members of the research team (R.J.B. & M.N.) independently coded the raw transcript

excerpts, identifying text that represented (i) barriers to routinely asking clients about emotional well-being, or (ii) facilitators to routinely asking clients about their emotional well-being, and also coding these excerpts as to whether they represented Capability, Opportunity, or Motivation domains<sup>24</sup>. In cases where the coders were unsure of the categorisation, text was highlighted but not categorised, and flagged for discussion with the third coder. Independent coding was cross-checked with discrepancies discussed to achieve resolution between the two coders and a third member of the team (C.J.M.). Then with the purpose of developing inductive categories, subthemes, and themes, identified codes were reviewed and clustered to form inductive categories within the subdomains of the COM-B. This step drew from thematic analysis methodology described by Braun and Clarke<sup>25</sup>.

## **Results**

In response to the initial interview question: “How do you currently ask your clients about the impact of their hearing loss on their emotional well-being?” only a couple of HHCs described directly asking clients about their emotional well-being, and most HHCs described some form of exploration regarding clients’ emotional well-being (e.g., only asking when the client first raised it as a concern). HHCs speculated that between 20 to 50% of clients raise emotional concerns during clinical encounters, and that they thus only ask about emotional well-being in 20-50% of cases. However, HHCs agreed that the percentage of clients who experienced reduced emotional well-being on account of their hearing loss was closer to 95-100%. A few participants speculated that between 60-80% of their clients experience ongoing emotional distress even after hearing rehabilitation.

Barriers and facilitators to routinely asking adult clients about their emotional and psychological well-being were identified within five of the COM-B domains, with the exception being physical capability (i.e., the physical strength of asking). The results from each of these five COM-B domains are discussed in more detail below, with example quotes that were representative of the barrier or facilitator. Themes and subthemes within the subdomains of the COM-B are presented in Tables 1-3 and related example quotes in Supplementary Tables 1-3.

### ***Psychological capability***

Psychological capability refers to the knowledge or psychological skills, strength or stamina to engage in the necessary mental processes for asking about emotional well-being. HHCs in

this study showed a high level of *understanding/knowledge* of when and why discussions relating to emotional well-being are pertinent to the audiological setting. Participants also demonstrated an *awareness* of the various emotional impacts associated with hearing loss, with all HHCs describing first-hand experiences of working with clients who present with emotional distress in the clinical setting. However, most HHCs described a lack of knowledge and skill regarding how to directly ask about emotional well-being; specifically, they reported a knowledge gap with respect to the use of appropriate language when enquiring about emotional well-being, how to appropriately describe symptoms, and phrases to signify empathy and understanding.

*“I don’t have the skills or the knowledge on how to delve into that a bit deeper.”*

(Clinician 6)

A key barrier to asking about emotional well-being was a lack of knowledge and skill regarding the “*next steps*”, that is, what to do when clients respond by describing their emotional distress.

*“I’m not going to ask them about it [emotional well-being], if I can’t measure it to show them that they are a right, and especially not if I can’t then fix it for them.”* (Clinician 7)

Equally, those HHCs who described a greater frequency and comfort with asking about emotional well-being described this as being facilitated by knowing how to have these conversations, and how to support clients who present with distress. The barrier of *forgetting* to ask clients about their emotional well-being during consultations was mentioned by two HHCs (see Table 1 and Supplementary Table 1).

### ***Physical Opportunity***

Physical opportunity is the opportunity afforded by the environment, encompassing location, time, and resources for asking about emotional well-being<sup>14</sup>. *Time* was mentioned by most HHCs in this study, yet they tended to describe time as a modifiable factor (see Table 2 and Supplementary Table 2). Although some HHCs indicated that they do not have time in their current appointment structure for lengthy discussions about emotional well-being, most HHCs indicated that they were able to manage their time accordingly, and it was not an impenetrable barrier but more of an inconvenience.

**Table 1.** Barriers and facilitators in capabilities of clinicians for asking about emotional well-being

Capability sub-domain, themes and corresponding sub-themes	B/F/M (N)
Physical capability	
Nil	
Psychological capability	
1. Knowledge of asking about emotional well-being	M (15)
• No knowledge of what questions to ask	B (3)
• (No) Knowledge of how to approach/ask about emotional well-being	M (4)
• No knowledge of how to guide the conversation about emotional well-being	B (4)
• Knowing about resources/where to find resource	F (2)
• Not knowing how to measure the psychosocial stuff	B (1)
• Not knowing the triggers to ask	B (1)
2. Skill	M (13)
• Not having the language to ask about emotional well-being	B (2)
• (No) counselling skills	M (5)
• Building rapport/trust with clients	F (2)
• (Lack of) skill of getting deep about emotional well-being	M (2)
• Asking about emotional well-being is difficult	M (2)
3. Forgetting	B (2)
4. hearing healthcare clinicians' awareness of emotional impacts of hearing loss	F (32)
• Awareness about different impacts on emotions and confidence	F (11)
• Awareness about frustration and need for coping	F (5)
• Awareness that clients may not bring their emotional issues up because of not knowing about the link between hearing loss and emotions	F (4)
• Awareness of clients' difficulties with their significant others because of the hearing loss	F (4)
• Awareness of stigma and social issues associated with hearing loss	F (8)

*Note.* B: Barrier, F: Facilitator, M: mixed, N: number of statements describing the phenomenon

Few HHCs specifically described a lack of *tools* or clinical resources as a barrier to asking clients about emotional well-being. However, most HHCs described various clinical tools that they would like to see developed for their clinic that they believe would help them more frequently and more successfully ask their clients about the emotional impacts of hearing loss (see below section on solutions).

*“If someone’s going to bring up a concern within an appointment, you want to have tools to be able to address that effectively.” (Clinician 8)*



**Table 2.** Barriers and facilitators in opportunities for clinicians for asking about emotional well-being

<b>Opportunity sub-domain, themes and corresponding sub-themes</b>	<b>B/F/M (N)</b>
<b>Physical opportunity</b>	
1. Time for asking about emotional well-being	M (7)
2. Tools	B (2)
<b>Social opportunity</b>	
1. Social influence from clients	M (44)
• (Lack of) clients' openness to questions about emotional well-being	M (26)
• If clients bring it up, audiologist asks about emotional impacts of hearing loss	F (4)
• Need for elaboration on questions about emotional impact questions to unaware clients	F (1)
• Clients distrust to qualifications of audiologist for mental health stuff	B (2)
• Cochlear implant clients more willing to express feelings than hearing aid clients	F (3)
• Male clients do not feel comfortable talking about emotions	B (2)
• Being a patient for an audiologist is difficult for some clients in certain professions	B (1)
• Lack of client awareness about audiologists' role in emotional stuff	B (3)
• Changes of clinicians and clients	B (1)
2. Supportive Peers	F (5)
3. Normalisation of discussions relating to emotional well-being (reduced stigma)	F (3)
4. Presences of significant others	F (5)

*Note.* B: Barrier, F: Facilitator, M: mixed, N: number of statements describing the phenomenon

### ***Social Opportunity***

Social opportunity is the opportunity afforded by interpersonal influences, cultural norms or social cues that influence the way we think about asking about emotional well-being from clients. The most described phenomenon in this study was the concept of *social influence from clients*, that is, whether the HHCs' interactions with their clients supported, or hindered, the opportunity to ask about emotional well-being. The HHCs described this phenomenon as being both a barrier and a facilitator depending on the individual client, that is, where some clients are open to and respond favourably to discussion relating to emotional well-being, others do not (see Table 2). Some HHCs described the phenomenon of social opportunity to be related to the client's age, gender, or duration of hearing loss (NB. hearing implant clients generally have a long experience with hearing loss compared to hearing aid users).

An additional facilitator encouraging HHCs to ask about emotional well-being included the acknowledgement that asking about emotional well-being is easier when *significant others* are present.

*“Sometimes, too, it’s a lot easier if you’ve got family members that come in because you’ll sometimes see the dynamics between family members for good or bad.”* (Clinician 5)

Facilitators improving the opportunity for HHCs to ask about emotional well-being included access to *supportive peers*, specifically mentors to provide assistance for difficult cases, and the recent *normalisation of discussions* relating to emotional well-being due to the COVID-19 pandemic. HHCs described a shift in perception, where clients previously seemed potentially offended when asked about emotional well-being (perceived by HHCs as likely due to the stigma associated with mental health), more recently clients appeared open to discussions relating to emotional well-being (perceived by HHCs as likely due to recent media raising awareness for the need of emotional self-care during the COVID-19 pandemic).

*“I think social isolation’s become a big buzz word with COVID-19, which is... I find it quite good because now when I talk about it, it’s not taboo anymore.”* (Clinician 4)

### ***Automatic Motivation***

Automatic motivation refers to automatic processes involving desires (wants and needs), emotional reactions, impulses, inhibitions and reflex responses associated with asking about emotional well-being. There was variation across the interviews in terms of the *emotions associated with asking* and the extent to which the HHCs felt comfortable asking clients about their emotional well-being. Where some clients described emotional discomfort and awkwardness, others described feeling very comfortable.

*“As I said, sometimes I feel quite comfortable with it.”* (Clinician 1)

A few HHCs described a lack of *habit* as a barrier to asking about emotional well-being. This phenomenon was also heavily reflected in participants’ descriptions of what they felt would help them to improve the frequency with which they ask about emotional well-being; specifically, HHCs described a desire for *reminders* and prompts within the workflow. One HHC described how they use an existing item in the case history form to prompt them to ask about emotional well-being (see Supplementary Table 3).

### ***Reflective Motivation***

Reflective motivation refers to reflective processes involving plans (self-conscious intentions) and evaluations (beliefs about what is good and bad) for asking clients about their emotional well-being. When prompted about their *beliefs regarding the potential consequences* relating to asking clients about emotional well-being, most HHCs in this study described positive belief structures describing how clients would benefit from increased acknowledgement of how their hearing loss has impacted their emotional well-being.

*“I think the advantages would be the fact that you’re uncovering some of these issues that, maybe, otherwise would never have been addressed. Then you can help them and get it addressed.”* (Clinician 2)

A few HHCs, however, did not believe in *effectiveness of referrals*.

*“Because my feeling is, even if they go to a psychologist, we don’t usually hear back. And perhaps for some of these people, especially if they’ve got a lot of hearing loss, teamwork’s needed. Because we understand the communication problems. They understand methods of dealing with anxiety, depression, or the things that can result.”* (Clinician 5)

There was variation across the interviews in terms of *beliefs about capabilities and confidence* asking about emotional well-being. Some HHCs believed that they lacked the confidence to ask about emotional well-being. Others perceived that they were sufficiently confident to ask about emotional well-being, whereas they often noted that they lacked the confidence to appropriately respond and/or provide emotional support when clients disclose emotional distress (see Table 3 and Supplementary Table 3).

A HHC also believed that a client who is *experiencing a life transition* may require more mental health support, specifically, young adult clients often describe increased difficulties caused by their hearing loss during a transition period, such as when starting university or a new job.

*“It’s their listening environment that’s changed, and there’s so much more work pressure on them and that’s what they’re actually struggling to deal with.”* (Clinician 14)

HHCs also expressed their *personal interest in the client as an individual* and acknowledged that asking about emotional well-being was within a HHC’s *scope of practice*, most often with the caveat that the emotional distress needed to be directly linked to the hearing loss. However, there appeared to be a sense that it perhaps was not their responsibility to ask about emotional well-being.

*“In rare cases, if they’re not seeing anyone else, then obviously it could be quite significant, but generally, they do see their doctors and things like that. So hopefully, we’re not the only person responsible for acknowledging or figuring something like that out, but obviously, for some people, there may be consequences if we’re the only one they see.”*

(Clinician 1)

**Table 3.** Barriers and facilitators in motivations of clinicians for asking about emotional well-being

Motivation sub-domain, themes and corresponding sub-themes	B/F/M (N)
<b>Automatic motivation</b>	
1. Emotions associated with asking clients	M (12)
• Feeling comfortable (or not)	M (10)
• Anticipated regret	B (1)
• Feeling anxious	B (1)
2. Being in the habit	M (6)
3. Use of reminders/prompts	F (4)
<b>Reflective motivation</b>	
1. Beliefs about consequences	M (15)
• Necessary to get more out of the rehabilitation	F (3)
• Beliefs about advantages of uncovering emotional issues and not ignoring it	F (11)
• Do not believe in effectiveness of referral	B (2)
• Opening a can of worm	B (1)
2. Beliefs about confidence/capabilities	M (11)
• (Lack of) confidence in asking	M (8)
• Feeling fine to ask about emotional well-being	F (2)
• Belief in own capability to feel the vibe	F (1)
3. Beliefs that a person experiencing a life transition may require more mental health support	F (1)
4. Personal interest in the client as an individual	F (11)
5. Scope of audiology	M (5)

*Note.* B: Barrier, F: Facilitator, M: mixed, N: number of statements describing the phenomenon

One HHC described how they do not ask about emotional well-being due to concern that the emotional distress described by the client may not relate to the hearing loss.

*“I know it sounds terrible, but you don’t really want them to open up certain things because we’re not the right people to discuss certain things with.”* (Clinician 5)

Some factors identified in this study had an influence on the other factors. For example, capability factors influenced motivation factors.

*“I think that anxiety on the clinician’s part of not quite knowing what to do [in response to psychological disclosure] and maybe creating a relationship that was outside of our scope of practice.” (Clinician 8)*

*“I’m quite new to the game, so I think my knowledge is much less because I have less experience with it. I feel like I’m quite aware. I know a lot about it where it’s enough to know and see the impact it’s having, but still haven’t had a lot of experience, so I wouldn’t be confident in that aspect.” (Clinician 4)*

### **Solutions**

HHCs expressed their desire for improved knowledge, specific tools, or environmental changes that they perceived would help them to more frequently ask about emotional well-being (see Table 4). Knowledge and skill training predominantly included example scripts, clinical guidelines, training on how to describe symptoms discussed in a GP report, and training on how to have conversations about emotional well-being. Environmental changes included prompts or reminders. Requests for resources included clinical tools to assist with identifying psychosocial goals for rehabilitation, educational videos, and client surveys.

**Table 4.** Suggested solutions for asking about emotional well-being

<b>Themes and sub-themes</b>	<b>Example quotes</b>
<b>1. Skills training</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Example scripts/questions about how to ask about emotional well-being</li> <li>● Appropriate language</li> <li>● Getting into the habit of asking</li> <li>● Require training with assessment and Q &amp; A to retain the skills</li> <li>● Clinicians’ awareness about the side effects of hearing loss</li> <li>● Role playing, hands-on training, and case study</li> <li>● Observing a counsellor talking to a client</li> <li>● Knowing how to calm clients down in the conversation</li> </ul>	<p>“Examples help, so if I was with a tinnitus client, it’s like, how is that impacting you? Is that causing any anxiety, frustration? But I don’t ask those kinds of questions to a purely hearing loss client.” (C1)</p> <p>“I don’t think that my language would be there just yet. I think I would need some training on it.” (C2)</p> <p>“And it’s just maybe getting into the habit of asking.” (C5)</p> <p>“Even though I dread to say it, maybe a little assessment at the end of time to make sure I’ve read it and retained it, just to reinforce those skills. And maybe, at some point, a Q and A again for those things, I tried this, but it didn’t work, or I’m not quite getting this bit here.” (C1)</p> <p>“It’s more the side effects, the anxiety and the depression, that get raised, so if the hearing is the major source of it, then I think it is incredibly important that we are aware of it and addressing it.” (C1)</p> <p>“But not just a listening seminar. A hands-on, active, doing hands-on type of training session.” (C13)</p> <p>“I also do like to observe. Like maybe observing a counsellor doing something with an actual client.” (C10)</p> <p>“... it would be helpful to know how to calm it down again after the tears.” (C6)</p>
<b>2. Specific resources to use</b>	

• Clear guidelines and protocols	“A clear guideline just like we have with everything else ... that we know to look for and then we know how to refer them.” (C2)
• Printed information about emotional impacts of hearing loss	“I find it easier to talk about the impacts of hearing loss if I have printed out sheets of the information in front of me.” (C7)
• A resource to structure the discussion around the emotional well-being	“It’s a really difficult discussion. So, I think maybe a resource could be very useful to give some structure to that.” (C8)
• A resource to give clients	“... some of the people they don’t know what they’re feeling because they can’t put it into words. It’s hard for some old bloke to come in and say that he’s feeling sad.” (C9)
• Access to peer-reviewed journal articles for clinicians	“Everyone has different access to peer review articles, which I think is interesting, I did have a library access for a little while.” (C8)
<b>3. Environmental changes</b>	
• Triggers/reminders (e.g., a checklist)	“I’m not entirely sure what would be the trigger, but maybe when you do complete your notes, did you blah, blah, blah, at the bottom of it, and so the more you see that, the more you go, oh, I forgot to do that.” (C1)
• A few reinforcements	“So often we get new thing rolled out, it’s in an email, read over that, and then a year later, you’re not doing it ... It needs to be reinforced maybe a few times over before these things really” (C1)
• Repetition and more practice with remembering to ask clients about emotional impacts	“Repetition ... Doing more often and with everyone and having that strict thing that we follow.” (C2)
• Providing some questions to clients before appointments	“Perhaps having more questions to think about. Not necessarily in the clinic, but at home, before or between appointments, that allows them to have a think and respond to emotional questions.” (C5)
• Emotional well-being as part of the case history	“I think it should be part of the case history. Then it’s normal. It’s legitimate. It’s part of our job.” (C7)
• Time for training	“Time for training, but also reminders to give it a go in the clinic.” (C7)
• Funding for extra time in appointments	“I believe that there should be a cost but not the client ... it would be wonderful if Medicare could support us but that’s not currently how it works.” (C6)

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*Note.* C: Clinician

## Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the barriers and facilitators faced by HHCs with respect to routinely asking adults with hearing loss about their emotional well-being. For the first time, this study used the COM-B model of behaviour change to explore HHCs’ perspectives on asking about emotions in audiology clinics; and the interviews and focus groups identified barriers and facilitators across five of the six COM-B domains, excluding physical capability. Overall, the findings indicated that HHCs generally believed in the benefits of asking about emotional well-being in audiology practice. However, they reported that they may sometimes not ask about emotions due to barriers associated with knowledge, available tools and time, and clients’ and HHCs’ motivations about talking about emotional well-being. These findings support previous research in other healthcare areas that showed clinicians could experience a range of barriers for exploring clients’ emotional concerns<sup>13, 26</sup>.

The main barriers in psychological capability identified in this study were gaps in HHCs' knowledge and skills regarding how to directly ask about emotions, and how to use appropriate language when enquiring about emotional well-being. HHCs also reported a lack of knowledge about approaching and guiding emotion-related conversations. Other studies on GPs indicated that this barrier could be related to the possession of communication skills<sup>22</sup>, the challenging nature of uncovering the true problems experienced by clients, or clients' experiences of stigma regarding their emotional concerns<sup>27</sup>. To overcome this barrier, the HHCs in the current study suggested practical and feasible solutions such as training sessions with example scripts and questions about how to ask clients about their emotions.

Similar to other areas of healthcare<sup>7, 27, 28</sup>, time pressure for lengthy discussions about psychological well-being was a concern in this study. Whilst the majority of HHCs indicated that they were able to manage their time to cover the emotion-related questions, funding for extra time was suggested to address the time barriers to having more in-depth discussions and providing clients with emotional support.

The social influence from clients was perceived to potentially hinder discussion around emotional well-being. Clients' openness to questions about emotions was identified as a key factor that played the role of both facilitator and barrier in the context of this study. Some HHCs reported being confident in discussing emotional well-being with clients who were ready and open to talk, but not with the clients who would "*shut it down quickly.*" Given that disclosure of the symptoms of the mental health problems could be challenging<sup>26</sup>,<sup>29</sup>, some HHCs suggested sending emotion-related questions to clients before their appointment so that clients could think about the questions beforehand. In addition, the presence of significant others was identified as a facilitator to ease the conversation about emotions. The importance of significant others in audiology clinics has already been identified in other research too<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, involving significant others when asking clients about emotional well-being could be an important facilitator.

The other major factors identified in this study were motivation factors. A motivation factor related to the increased hearing difficulties observed by young adult clients when they transitioned through life stages, such as starting university or employment. As starting to work could be challenging for young adults<sup>31</sup>, HHCs are encouraged to explore audiological and lifestyle changes when discussing mental well-being. Another important factor was beliefs about audiology scope of practice. While survey in a cross-sectional study has highlighted barriers related to Australian HHCs' beliefs about the scope of practice in

addressing clients' emotional needs<sup>7</sup>, the qualitative interview approach used here in allowed for depth of understanding; specifically some HHCs considered asking about emotional well-being as “*definitely within the scope of practice*” whilst others believed that they were not “*the right people to discuss certain things.*” Given that there is no available guideline, protocol, or specific tools for audiologists to help them with the conversation about emotional well-being, it is understandable that they might be uncertain whether asking about emotions would be within their scope of practice; even though the HHCs in the current study expressed their beliefs about the potential advantages of uncovering emotional issues. Some HHCs also suggested a resource should be developed to structure the discussion around emotional well-being.

### **Clinical considerations**

This study has important clinical implications for HHCs and audiology clinic managers. To improve the outcome of audiology services, an emphasis on emotionally focused communication in clinics has been suggested<sup>8</sup>. To facilitate asking questions about emotions, the barriers identified in the current study need to be addressed. The Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW) offers a framework for systematically developing a behaviour change intervention that will address each of these barriers<sup>14</sup>. Firstly, the knowledge gap about how to ask about emotional well-being could be reduced by training and enablement sessions as well as developing and introducing relevant tools and guidelines. Given that capability have a direct influence on motivations<sup>32</sup>, HHCs may need training, role playing, and workshops in relation to counselling skills and language to improve their abilities as well as motivation toward asking about emotions. Second, given that prompts and cues have been identified as effective techniques for changing behaviours<sup>14</sup>, introducing triggers or reminders could help HHCs to include questions about emotions in their history taking in audiology sessions.

### **Limitations and further research**

This study increased our understanding of the current situation of discussions around emotional well-being in audiology clinics in Western Australia. However, this study had some limitations. Firstly, participants were recruited from a single chain of hearing aid clinics, limiting the applicability of the findings to other settings. Other clinics are likely to have other barriers and facilitators for routinely asking about emotional well-being. Although only a small number of HHCs participated in the study, data saturation was achieved for this



sample. Second, as audiology is a profession with a relatively high proportion of females, most participants were female in this study, and it is possible that the perceived barriers and facilitators to asking patients about their emotional wellbeing would differ among male HHCs. This study aimed to understand the barriers to asking about emotional well-being within a hearing services organisation to develop a context-specific behavioural intervention to increase and enhance how these audiologists ask about emotional well-being during their clinical appointments. Future studies may explore the barriers and facilitators in other hearing services organisations to establish whether there are common barriers that perhaps need to be addressed at a broader professional scale. Future studies are also required to develop referral pathways and to introduce how to integrate, manage, and communicate the approach of asking about emotions in clinics' routine practice.

### **Conclusions**

For the first time, this study used the COM-B model of behaviour change to identify the barriers and facilitators to routinely asking adults with hearing loss about their emotional well-being in audiology clinics. The results identified main barriers in capabilities (e.g., knowledge), opportunities (e.g., time and tools), and motivation (e.g., beliefs about benefits of asking about emotions) that need to be addressed for audiologists to ask their clients about their emotional well-being.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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