

Talking to Patients:

Communicating Clearly and Ethically About the Link Between Hearing Loss and Dementia

How is hearing loss related to cognitive decline and dementia? What does it mean to say that hearing loss is a “risk factor” for dementia? These are questions that patients are asking, and in Clinical Bulletin #3 we’re providing you with some help in answering those questions, as well as some simple teaching aids that you may wish to use in your practice.

We draw on a plenary talk from the ADA’s 2024 annual meeting in Dallas, Texas. The talk featured Dr. Jan Blustein, a Professor of Medicine and Public Health at New York University’s Langone School of Medicine. Dr. Blustein draws on her knowledge of statistics and epidemiology as well as her experience as a person with hearing loss to critique some of the messages that have circulated about the hearing loss – dementia link. She argues that patients, providers and the members of the public have misunderstood much of the information that they’ve received, because “risk” means something different in scientific language than it does in everyday speech. While hearing loss is certainly a risk for dementia, evidence that hearing loss causes dementia is thin. However, evidence suggests that having a hearing loss disadvantages those who are likely to develop dementia symptoms for reasons unrelated to their hearing loss. There’s much more to this story, and if you’re interested, take the time to review the whole talk.

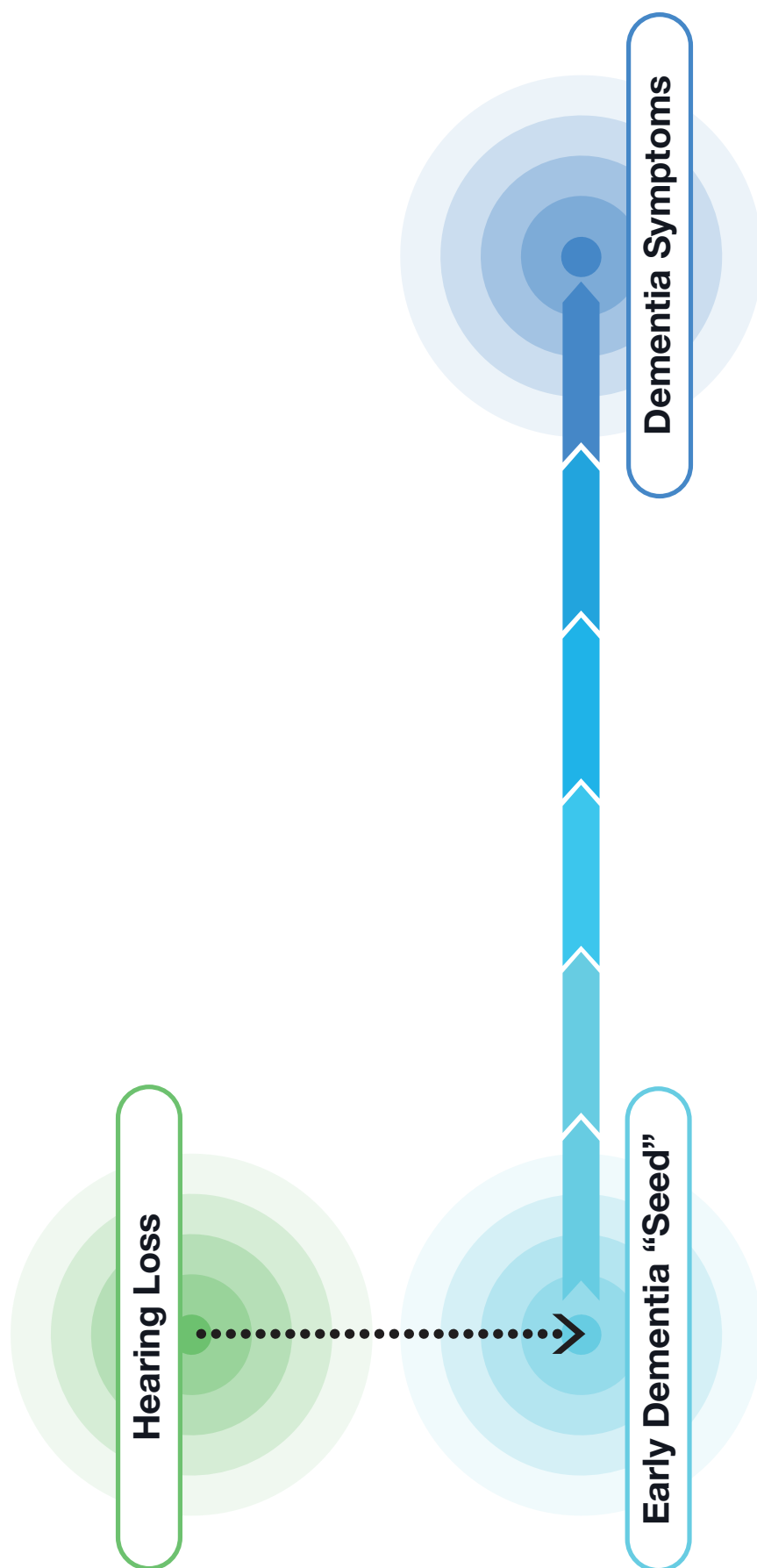
But let’s get back to communicating with your patients. On the following pages, we provide three downloadable teaching aids based on the Dallas talk. These three illustrations should be used together to help explain to patients the hearing loss-dementia link and how hearing aids might break this link. You can download and print them for use in meetings with patients who raise the question of the hearing loss – dementia link. To help get you ready to use them, you may want to review the relevant sections of Dr. Blustein’s talk. You can view her talk by scanning the QR code (about 10 minutes; from 35:29 – 46:34 is the most relevant section).



[View Dr. Blustein's
AuDacity 2024 Talk](#)

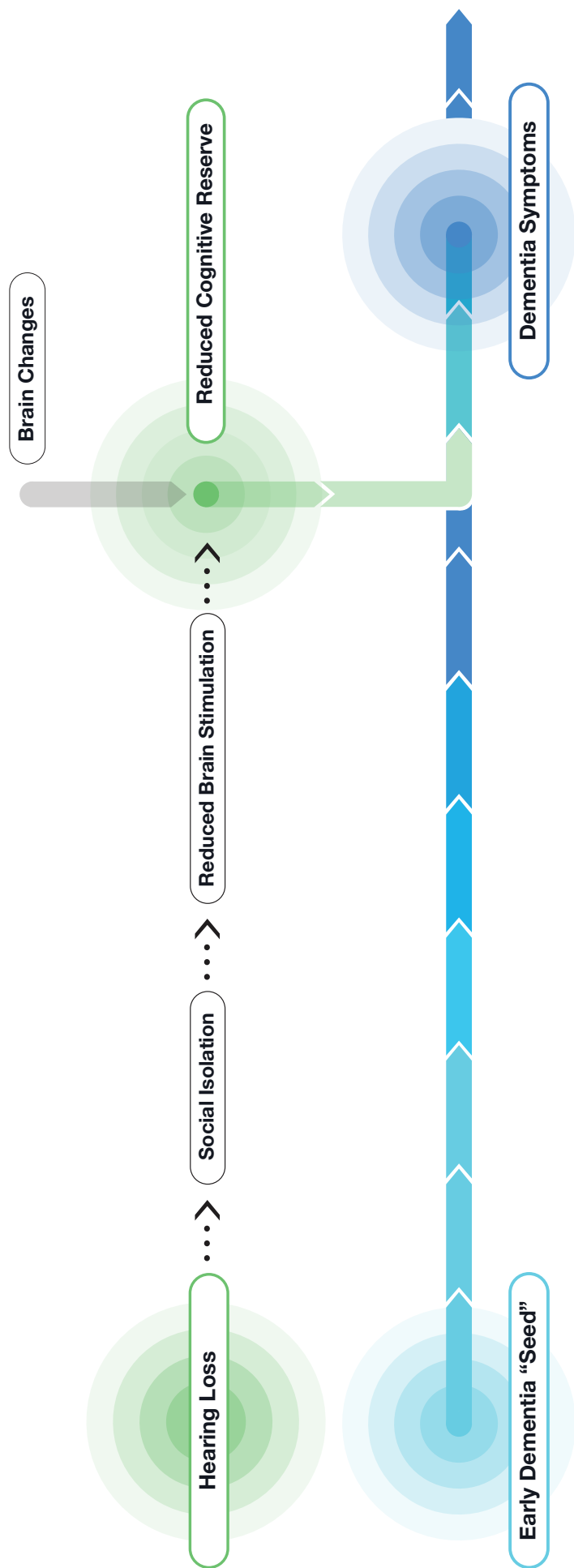
The Link Between Hearing Loss & Dementia

A COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING



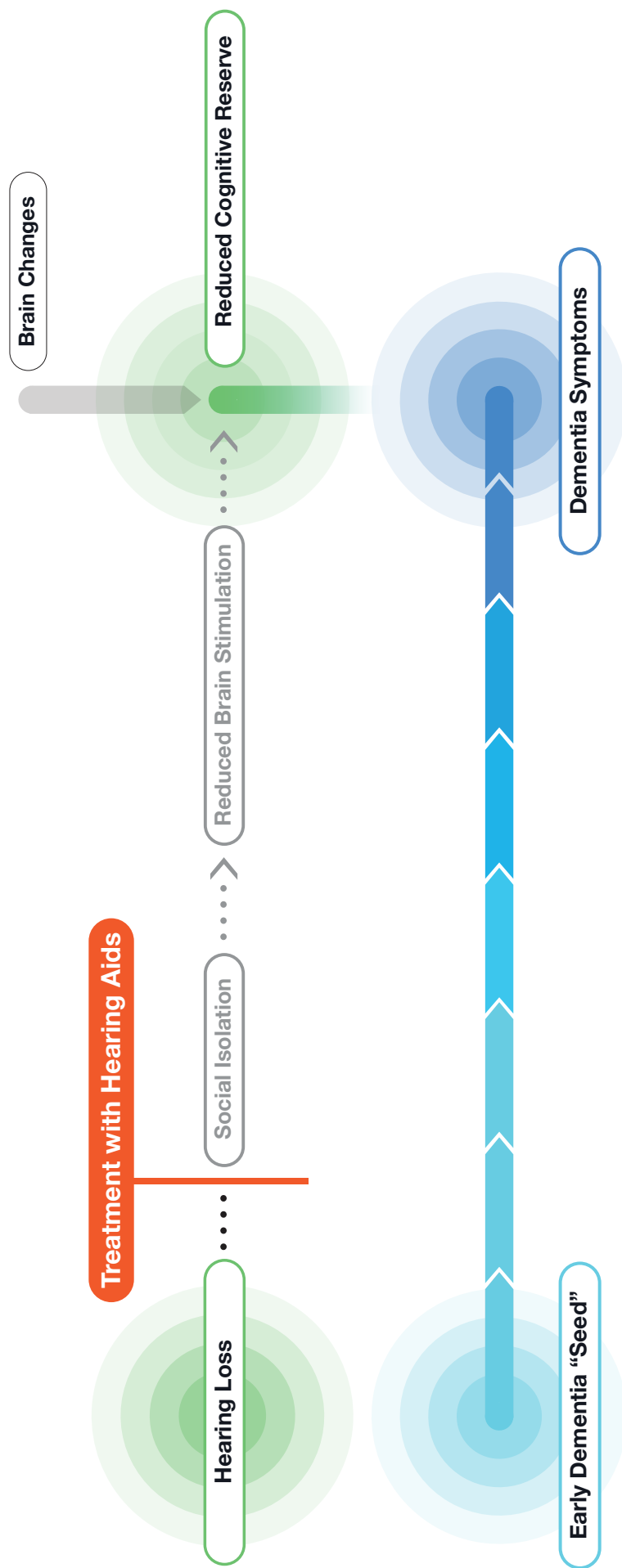
The Link Between Hearing Loss & Dementia

WHAT MIGHT EXPLAIN IT?



The Link Between Hearing Loss & Dementia

HOW HEARING AIDS MIGHT BREAK THE LINK





Key Talking Points

For each of the three diagrams, we provide some language or talking points that can be used to have more focused, research-supported conversations with patients about the topic of hearing loss and dementia. All three diagrams should be used during counseling sessions with patients and their families.

A note about the dementia “seed” in the diagrams: since we do not know what causes dementia, we've used the term “seed” as a placeholder for the underlying cause(s). Those causes could be genetic, environmental, or a combination of factors.

Diagram 1

Diagram 1 illustrates how many non-scientists misunderstand the way the term “risk” is used in research.

In everyday language, “risk” is usually understood as something that causes a bad outcome. For example, not wearing a seatbelt is a “risk” for injury in a car accident.

So, when non-scientists (i.e., almost all patients) hear that “hearing loss is a RISK for dementia,” they are prone to understand in the way that is illustrated in Diagram 1: somehow, hearing loss plants the dementia “seed.”

Diagram 2

Diagram 2 illustrates a more ethical and responsible way to discuss risk in relationship to hearing loss and dementia – one that details how hearing loss can lead to greater social isolation and reduced brain stimulation, which eventually may result in physical and psychological changes.

In this uncoupled model illustrated in Diagram 2, note that the path between the dementia “seed” and dementia runs in parallel with the path between hearing loss and reduced cognitive reserve.

Diagram 2 illustrates how individuals with hearing loss who also have the “seed” that predisposes to dementia may develop dementia symptoms earlier as a result of the reduced cognitive reserve brought on by their hearing loss.

Diagram 3

Diagram 3 illustrates how hearing aids have the potential to break the link between hearing loss, social isolation and reduced brain stimulation – factors that may be linked to the timing of dementia onset.

For those individuals with the dementia “seed,” treatment with hearing aids may delay or slow down the onset of dementia symptoms.

It is also important to emphasize, using Diagram 3, that treatment with hearing aids reduces social isolation and improves brain stimulation — worthwhile benefits that make life better. ■