

Tips for Communicating with Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People

Introduction

Deafness is a fact of many people's lives ... more than 22 million Americans have some form of hearing loss. Like their hearing counterparts, deaf people build successful careers, have families, watch television, go to the movies, talk on the telephone, play sports, and travel throughout the world.

Most deaf people don't view their deafness as a disability or as a problem that should be fixed. For many of them, it's a natural part of a cultural experience that they share with friends, both deaf and hearing.

Deaf culture is a sense of community among deaf people. Cultural activities can include communicating in American Sign Language (ASL), sharing information about resources that can enhance deaf people's lives, performing and attending theatrical events with no spoken language, joking about the experience of being deaf, and reflecting on role models and events important to deaf people.

All of us have our own way of doing things, and deaf people are no different.

Deaf people communicate in different ways, depending on several factors: age at which deafness began; type of deafness; language skills; amount of residual hearing; speechreading skills; speech abilities; personality; family environment; educational background; and personal preference.

Some deaf people use speech or sign language only ... or a combination of sign language, fingerspelling, and speech ... or writing ... or body language and facial expression. You can communicate with deaf people in several ways. The key is to find out which combination of techniques works best with each deaf person. Keep in mind that it is not how you exchange ideas, but that you do.

One – to- One

To Communicate with a Deaf Person in a One—to-One Situation:

Get the deaf person's attention before speaking. Call out the person's name; if that is not successful, a tap on the shoulder, a wave, or another visual signal usually does the trick.

Key the deaf person in to the topic of discussion. Deaf people need to know what subject matter will be discussed in order to pick up words that help them follow the conversation. This is especially important for deaf people who depend on speechreading.

Speak slowly and clearly, but do not yell, exaggerate, or overpronounce. Exaggeration and overemphasis of words distort lip movements, making speechreading more difficult. Try to enunciate each word without force or tension. Short sentences are easier to understand than long ones.

Look directly at the deaf person when speaking. Avoid turning away to write on the board, look at a computer screen, or pull something from a file while speaking.

Do not place anything in your mouth when speaking. Mustaches that obscure the lips, smoking, pencil chewing, and putting your hands in front of your face all make it difficult for deaf people to follow what is being said.

Maintain eye contact with the deaf person. Eye contact conveys the feeling of direct communication. Even if an interpreter is present, continue to speak directly to the deaf person. He/she will turn to the interpreter as needed.

Use the words “I” and “you” when communicating through an interpreter, not “Tell him...” or “Does she understand?”

Avoid standing in front of a light source, such as a window or bright light. The glare and shadows created on the face make it almost impossible for the deaf person to speechread.

First repeat, then try to rephrase a thought if you have problems being understood, rather than repeating the same words again. If the person only missed one or two words the first time, one repetition usually helps. Don’t hesitate to communicate by pencil and paper if necessary, as particular combinations of lip movements sometimes are difficult to speechread. Getting the message across is more important than the medium used.

Use pantomime, body language, and facial expression to help supplement your communication. A lively speaker always is more interesting to watch.

Be courteous to the deaf person during conversation. If the telephone rings or someone knocks at the door, excuse yourself and tell the deaf person that you are answering the phone or responding to the knock. Do not ignore the deaf person and carry on a conversation with someone else while the deaf person waits.

Use open-ended questions that must be answered by more than “yes” or “no”. Do not assume that deaf people have understood your message if they nod their heads in acknowledgement. A coherent response to an open-ended question ensures that your information has been communicated.

In a Group

If you participate in group situations with deaf people (meetings, classes, etc.), these tips will make communication easier.

Ask the deaf person to choose the best seating for communication. This usually means a seat near the speaker so that the deaf person can see the speaker’s lips. If possible, use a round table or semicircular seating so that he/she can see everyone’s face.

Usually, the deaf person will know best where to sit. Also take into consideration the area's lighting so that the speaker is illuminated clearly.

Provide new vocabulary in advance. It is difficult, if not impossible, to speechread and read the fingerspelling of unfamiliar vocabulary. If new vocabulary cannot be presented in advance, write the terms on paper, a chalkboard, or an overhead projector if possible. If a lecture is to be given or a film shown, a brief outline or script given to the deaf person in advance helps that person follow the presentation.

Avoid unnecessary pacing and speaking when writing on a chalkboard. It is difficult to speechread a person in motion and impossible to speechread one whose back is turned. Write or draw on the board, then face the group and explain the work. If you use an overhead projector, do not look down at it while speaking.

Use visual aids, if possible. Vision is a deaf person's primary channel for receiving information. Make full use of available aids, including films, videotapes, overhead projectors, computer-generated presentations such as Power Point, diagrams, and chalkboards. Give the participants time to read before speaking.

Make sure the deaf person doesn't miss vital information. Write out any changes in meeting times, special assignments, additional instructions, etc. Allow extra time when referring to manuals or texts since deaf people must look at what has been written and then return their attention to the speaker.

Slow down the pace of communication slightly to facilitate understanding. Many speakers talk too fast. Allow extra time for the deaf person to ask or answer questions.

Repeat questions or statements made from the back of the room and point to the person speaking. Remember that deaf people are cut off from whatever happens outside their visual area.

Allow full participation by the deaf person in the discussion. It is difficult for deaf people to participate in group discussions because they are not sure when speakers have finished. The group leader or teacher should recognize the deaf person from time to time to allow full participation by that person. Be aware of turn-taking and try to give the deaf person a chance to look at the various participants before each speaks.

Use hands-on experience whenever possible in training situations. Like other people, deaf people learn quickly by "doing." What may be difficult to communicate verbally may be explained easily by a hands-on demonstration.

Work with an interpreter in a large group setting. In such a situation, an interpreter will be a few words behind the speaker in transferring the information. Therefore, allow time for the deaf person to obtain all the information and ask questions. See the section "Through an interpreter" for more information.

Use a notetaker when possible to record information. It is difficult for many deaf people to pay attention to a speaker and take notes simultaneously.

Through an Interpreter

Interpreters can help facilitate communication during lectures, meetings, or other group situations. Before requesting an interpreter, keep in mind that an interpreter is a trained professional bound by a code of ethics. Knowing sign language does not qualify a person to act as an interpreter therefore, using a professional interpreter is best.

Before requesting an interpreter, ask the deaf person what type of interpreter he/she prefers. Some may want a sign language interpreter skilled in American Sign Language (ASL) or signed English, others may prefer an oral interpreter, and in some settings, the interpreter may voice interpret what the deaf person wishes to express. (Voice interpreting or sign-to-voice) interpreting formerly was called reverse interpreting.) Some tips to keep in mind when scheduling interpreting services:

Inform the interpreting referral service of the deaf person's needs and in what setting the interpreting will take place. If highly technical language will be used, the referral service will try to match your needs with an interpreter who is familiar with the subject.

Discuss fees and privileges with the interpreter beforehand. Fees should be agreed upon by the interpreter or referral service before the service is performed. Such fees should not be discussed with the deaf person.

Treat the interpreter as a professional. It is courteous to introduce the interpreter to the group and explain why he/she is attending. Be attentive to the interpreter's special needs, such as a glass of water, a straightback chair, etc. The interpreter may have other needs such as placement in the room (near the main speaker/group leader or away from windows to reduce glare). If the interpreting situation involves lunch or other meals, the interpreter should be given the same privileges as the other group members. It also is helpful to meet with the interpreter about 15 minutes early to explain what will be covered. If possible, give a copy of handouts, overheads, and/or lecture or speech to be interpreted.

If a meeting will last more than an hour and a half, it is preferable to have two interpreters because it is difficult to interpret for more than an hour and a half. If the meeting, class, or lecture will take longer, two interpreters should act on a rotating basis.

Schedule breaks during the meeting. If the interpreting situation requires darkening the room to view slides, videotapes, or films, auxiliary lighting is necessary so that the deaf person can see the interpreter. If a small lamp or spotlight cannot be obtained, check to see if room lights can be dimmed but still provide enough light to see the interpreter.

Speak directly to the deaf person, not the interpreter, when working with an interpreter. The interpreter is not part of the conversation and is not permitted to voice personal opinions or enter the conversation. Face the deaf person and speak to him/her in

a normal manner. If the deaf person wants the interpreter to explain something not related to the conversation, he/she is the only one who may ask the interpreter.

Remember that the interpreter is a few words behind the speaker. Give the interpreter time to finish so that the deaf person can ask questions or join the discussion.

Permit only one person to speak at a time during group discussions. It is difficult for an interpreter to follow several people speaking at once. Ask for a brief pause between speakers to permit the interpreter to finish before the next speaker starts.

Speak clearly and in a normal tone when working with an interpreter. Do not rush through a speech. If reading verbatim text, read slowly. Remember to breathe between sentences – this helps the interpreter to keep up. The interpreter or the deaf person may ask the speaker to slow down or repeat a word or sentence for clarification.

As a final courtesy, thank the interpreter after the service has been performed. If there have been any problems or misunderstandings, let the interpreter or referral service know. Also, ask the deaf person if the service was satisfactory. It always is a polite gesture to inform the referral service of your satisfaction with the interpreter.

At An Interview

These tips can be used in conjunction with the “One-to-One” tips to facilitate an interview with a deaf job applicant. They will make the interview more productive and comfortable for both the interviewer and interviewee.

Provide company literature for the applicant to review before the interview. This helps the applicant become familiar with the company, its components, and terms.

Provide a written itinerary if the applicant is to be interviewed by more than one person. Include the names, titles, and meeting times for each individual the applicant will see. Speechreading an unfamiliar person’s title and name during a meeting often is difficult. An itinerary allows the deaf person to be better informed, at ease, and able to follow up later if needed.

Inform your receptionist or secretary beforehand that you are expecting a deaf applicant for an interview. This will make it easier for the receptionist to assist the deaf person and facilitate any necessary paperwork.

Consider providing an interpreter. Through an interpreter, you may receive a better idea of how the applicant’s skills match the job. Ask the deaf person if he/she would prefer an interpreter to be present before requesting one.

At Work

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guarantees equal opportunities in the workplace for people with disabilities. Accommodations made will vary depending on deaf employees' job responsibilities, technical skills, and communication preferences as well as the characteristics of the organization.

It generally is not necessary to make major modifications in the work area to accommodate a deaf employee. There are some things you can do, however, to make the work area more accessible and therefore more comfortable for a deaf employee.

Consider the deaf person's sensitivity to noise. It is a myth that deaf people can work in noisy environments that hearing people cannot tolerate. Most deaf people have some residual hearing and are bothered by loud noises. A noisy environment may create a barrier to communication for someone who wears a hearing aid. Loud or background noises can interfere with and distort the sound amplification of a person's hearing aid, making speech discrimination difficult. Loud noises also may further damage whatever residual hearing the deaf person has.

Consider the buddy system for a new deaf employee. This can make the job transition much easier for the deaf person. A co-worker can be asked to check a deaf employee's awareness of emergency situations, such as fires or evacuation.

Use signaling devices if a deaf employee works alone in an area. Most of these devices are inexpensive and can be incorporated easily into existing alarm systems. Alarms to warn of fire or gas leaks by use of a flashing light and audio signal can plug into regular electrical outlets. Other devices indicate machine malfunction, doorbells, and ringing telephones.

Minimize vibration in the work area. Vibration can distort the sound being received by a hearing aid, making it difficult for the deaf person to concentrate on work or a conversation. Since it is not always possible to eliminate vibration, it is best to arrange meetings in a location where vibration can be minimized.

Use visual clues to enhance communication. Use of a round or oval table during meetings will facilitate the line of sight between people, as will semicircular seating arrangements. Open doors or panels in offices allow deaf people to see into rooms before entering. A good line of sight between the deaf employee and the secretary also will facilitate telephone communication.

Use paging devices to contact deaf employees in the field. Radio frequencies have been set aside by the Federal Communications Commission to permit the use of "tactile pagers" vibrating paging devices that can be used to contact or warn deaf employees in the field or in remote locations. Such pagers usually can be incorporated into existing security paging systems.

Add odor to gas lines to indicate gas leaks to deaf persons working in laboratories.

Prepare for power failures in areas not covered by a general system with small, fail-safe, plug-in lights. These lights benefit all employees during such an emergency.

Notify security if a deaf employee will be working alone at night or during off hours, such as weekends. The deaf employee's work area should be checked periodically.

Communicate information directly to deaf employees. They may not pick up information by informal channels because they typically cannot overhear conversations.

Include the deaf employee in social activities. It may take a little while to become used to the difference in some deaf people's voices, but by including the deaf person in lunch, coffee breaks, the office grapevine, etc., he/she will become part of the group.

In Writing

Always ask deaf people if they prefer written communication. Do not assume that this is the preferred method. When using writing as a form of communication with deaf people, take into consideration English reading and writing skills. Their skills may depend on whether they were born deaf or became deaf later in life, what teaching method was used in their education, and which communication method they prefer.

Keep your message short and simple. Establish the subject area, avoid assumptions, and make your sentences concise.

It is not necessary to write out every word. Short phrases or a few words often are sufficient to transfer the information.

Do not use "yes" or "no" questions. Open-ended questions ensure a response that allows you to see if your message was received correctly.

Face the deaf person after you have written your message. If you can see each other's facial expressions, communication will be easier and more accurate.

Use visual representations if you are explaining specific or technical vocabulary to a deaf person. Drawings and diagrams can help the person comprehend the information.