

Best Practices for Interacting with People who are Deaf and People who are Hard of Hearing

The information below provides a series of helpful tips for interacting with people who are Deaf, and for interacting with people who have a significant hearing loss. The tips and techniques for each group can be very different.

People who are Deaf DO NOT consider themselves to be disabled. They see themselves as a cultural minority who communicate in a manner different from people who can hear. They often interact with other people who are Deaf in a rich and multi-layered network of Deaf organizations and institutions that few hearing people know about. Some people who are Deaf will speak or make other vocalizations while they are communicating through a type of sign language. Others may not. Sometimes this depends on whether they were Deaf from birth or became Deaf later in life. Some people who are Deaf can understand what a hearing person is saying by reading their lips. Others cannot. There is a great deal of diversity in the communication methods used by people who are Deaf.

Some people who have a significant hearing loss do consider themselves to be people with a disability. Others do not. Some will use assistive devices such as hearing aides. Others may not. Some people have hearing loss in both ears. Others may only have hearing loss in one ear. 1 out of every 3 people will develop a hearing loss during their lifetime. Some people have had hearing loss since childhood, but for most hearing loss developed as they aged. Hearing loss can occur as early as 45 years of age. People with hearing loss may have had little or no contact with the Deaf community.

Best Practices When Interacting with People Who are Deaf

DO look at the Deaf Individual you are communicating with. DO NOT focus your attention on the Interpreter.

Communicating through an interpreter can require turn-taking. DO wait your turn to talk.

DON'T get between a sign language interpreter and Deaf individuals they are interpreting for

DO capitalize the word "Deaf." People who are Deaf consider themselves to be a cultural minority group. DO NOT refer to people who are Deaf as "disabled." That is not how they perceive themselves to be at all.

DON'T assume that a person who is Deaf uses American Sign Language (ASL). There are multiple forms of communication used by persons who are Deaf. DO ask the person what type of communication they prefer.

DO remember that people who utilize American Sign Language (ASL) as their primary mode of communication may not write with English syntax. DON'T make a judgement about a Deaf person's intelligence based only on the way that they write sentences in English.

Do remember that punctuation and emphasis in ASL is communicated through the size and speed of signs and through facial expressions. DON't make a judgement about their mental state or stability based only on their gestures and facial expressions.

DON'T rely on family members or children to interpret for a person who is Deaf unless it is an emergency situation or involves brief and simple communication that is not about sensitive topics. DO engage the services of a professional interpreter.

DON'T reject a phone call from a video or audio relay operator. People who are Deaf can communicate with hearing persons over the phone via an audio or video relay service. DO prepare yourself to receive and initiate a relay call when you answer a phone call from or need to contact a person who is Deaf.

DO provide a way for people who are Deaf to request interpretation for community events the public is invited to attend. Event flyers can include a statement that an ASL interpreting is available by request in advance. The sponsoring organization should plan ahead for the cost of paying for interpreters.

DO ensure that at events that there is light on the interpreter's hands & reserved seating in front so that people who are Deaf can see the interpreter clearly

Best Practices When Interacting with People Who Have a Significant Hearing Loss

DO face the person directly and at the same level, if possible.

DO speak clearly, and at a normal volume and speed.

DO make sure that a lighting source, such as a lamp or window, is not behind you. This will make it difficult for the person to read your lips. Try to make sure the background behind you is a wall so that it doesn't make it difficult for the other person to see your face and read your lips.

DO remember that speech reading is not 100% accurate. For most people, it's about 33% accurate. Some people who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing may not be able to read your lips to determine what you're saying. Facial features- mustache, beard, crooked teeth, talking out of the side of one's mouth, head turning make it difficult to read lips.

DO speak directly to the person, not to an interpreter or someone who might be with the person you're talking to. Our tendency is to follow the voice. Be mindful of this. Perhaps you could place yourself next to the interpreter, slightly in front, so that the Deaf person can see both you and the interpreter.

DO make sure you are being understood. If the person seems confused or unsure, rephrase your statement using different words. For short communications, ask if writing notes is okay.

DO remember that a beard or mustache may obscure your mouth and make it harder for a person to read your lips.

DO remember that "hard of hearing" is different from "Deaf". People who are Deaf see themselves as a separate cultural minority.

DON'T yell. It doesn't help because it distorts your face and mouth, making it harder for someone to read your lips.

DON'T enter a bedroom or hospital room of a person who is Deaf or hard-of hearing without flipping the light switch on and off a couple of times to let the person know you are there.

NOTE: This information was adapted from factsheets produced by Starr Guckert of Aurora of Central NY, and appears on the website of the Onondaga County/Syracuse Human Rights Commission at www.ongov.net/humanrights/people-deaf.html