

Deaf Awareness Week

1st - 7th May 2023

This year's Deaf Awareness Week is 1st to 7th of May, and the purpose of this week is to increase public awareness about the issues affecting Deaf people and Deaf culture as a whole. It is a great time to learn how to be a better ally to those in the Deaf or hearing loss community.

This year's theme is "Access to Communication" and is all about learning about the barriers to communication that deaf people come across and how to break these down.

D/deaf and the difference

People who identify as Deaf (with a capital D) are usually Deaf from birth and tend to use sign language as their primary language, and consider themselves part of the Deaf community and embrace Deaf culture.

People who identify as deaf tend to have lost hearing through their lives and don't always use sign languages but may use hearing aids and lip reading more so than Deaf people. Some people will say they have hearing loss, or are hard of hearing instead.

There are lots of tips about communicating with Deaf people and people with hearing loss, here a few below:

Tips and information for communicating with a Deaf person

Working with Interpreters

Find out what their preferred language is, if they are sign language users try and ensure an interpreter is available. Interpreters are there to aid BOTH the hearing person and the Deaf person in communicating. E.g. a Deaf person may not know certain words such as medical terms so the interpreter will be able to provide explanations in sign as to what these terms mean

Prep for the conversation

If an interpreter is booked for the conversation, the Deaf person and the interpreter may require some time at the beginning of the meeting to have a conversation about the individual's preferred use of language. Interpreters also require preparation notes before some conversations, especially if covering formal conversations or lots of information/ in-depth information

Which signed language?

There are lots of types of signed languages – British Sign Language (BSL) is the official sign language of the UK. Makaton is a method of communication that is sign based but is not a language and does differ from BSL. Lots of sign videos on social media use ASL – American Sign Language which is also different to BSL

There are regional variations in signed languages just like spoken accents and local phrases

Can they see you?

Ensure the person can see you and you have their attention before speaking, they may choose to watch you and then look to the interpreter for clarification, or they may focus on the interpreter whilst you speak.

If you aren't looking at them then they are unlikely to be able to follow what you are saying or know you are talking

Get lit!

Make sure that the room is well lit, and don't position yourself with a window behind you as this can make it harder for people to see your mouth to lip read

Talk to them

Talk to the individual and not the interpreter. Don't use phrases such as "Can you tell them..." or "what did they say?"
Speak at your usual volume and speed, and with normal lip patterns – some people tend to slow down and exaggerate their pronunciation of words with the idea that this may make it easier for the Deaf person to follow but this can make you harder to lip read

English as a second language

Remember that written English is a second language to a lot of Deaf people and BSL doesn't have a written version. Bear this in mind if using written text as this can present as challenging to some individuals. English has a completely different grammar structure to BSL, just like French and English are different in this way

Take breaks

Make time for breaks, it can be harder to communicate using more than one language, or if the individual is lip reading this can be difficult and tiring so ensure there's time for people to have a break

Tips and information for communicating with a deaf person or someone who has hearing loss

Ask them what's best

Ask the person what works for them best – they may ask for you to wear a microphone, or to sit closer to them. They will know what makes conversations easier for them to access so ensure you have asked them what they need

Technology

Test and use technology where it is available and the person wishes to. Some people may have microphones that can be used in meetings and directly linked to their hearing aids or other devices to aid them. Some meeting rooms have loop systems in place which can be beneficial for people who use hearing aids

Your face!

Face the person you are talking to ensuring they can see your face clearly. Try not to cover your mouth or look away whilst talking to them (such as looking down at your phone). Try to ensure there is good lighting so people can see your face

Background noise

Reduce background noise – try and find somewhere quiet where there aren't lots of other things going on and lots of noise so that they are able to hear you as well as possible

One at a time

Don't talk over others, in meetings try not to talk amongst yourselves whilst others are talking as this will make it hard for people who have hearing loss to be able to hear what is being said by the main speaker.

Other actions such as tapping your pen against the table or rustling food packets can also stop people from being able to hear clearly

Breaks

Take regular breaks, it can be tiring to follow conversations and it takes a lot of concentration to lip read and fully focus on conversations so having regular breaks can be helpful

Don't shout!

Don't shout! If you ask the person what is best for them they may ask you to speak at a louder volume or at a slower pace but starting a conversation by shouting is very rarely successful!

Take your time

Sometimes people may not have understood or heard what has been said, allow time and space for people to ask for clarification if needed

Try not to just say "I'll tell you later" or "Never mind" if someone hasn't heard you. This can feel incredibly dismissive and isn't inclusive. Take the time needed for everyone to be fully included in the conversation

Agenda

In meetings try to use an agenda as this can help people follow the conversation, and can aid them with picking up the "context" of the conversation

Gestures

Some people gain additional information from the facial expressions someone is using as well as natural hand gestures. These can be really useful but exaggerated or unnecessary hand movements and physical movements/gestures can be very distracting and can make it harder for someone to follow the conversation

On the Phone

Good phone etiquette is very important to ensure phone calls are accessible.

Make sure you speak clearly and directly into the phone's microphone (without being too close to it or it can distort the sound) and remove as much background noise as possible.

Some people find it incredibly difficult to hear someone who is on the "speakerphone" option and is not holding the phone near to their mouths when speaking.

Ensure the person knows who they are speaking to and what the conversation is about, don't rush the conversation but be prepared to repeat parts or offer clarification when and if needed

Unhelpful things people say to D/deaf people or people with hearing loss

Wow, you don't look Deaf!

Do you really need subtitles though?

Do you need braille?

Do you know how to drive?/Are you allowed to drive?

Hearing aids can make it normal, right?

But you speak really well!

You poor thing!/ I'm sorry to hear that

Nevermind/ Don't worry/ It doesn't matter