

Eight Tips That Everyone Can Use When They Want to Communicate with People with Hearing Loss

1. Get their attention before attempting to talk or communicate.

Making eye contact is a good way to do this. If needed, you can use a small wave or light touch to get the person's attention. While you should be considerate and not poke people, generally it is not considered rude in deaf communities to lightly touch people you do not know to get their attention. The shoulder is a good place to touch someone you don't know well; use a couple of short, light taps.

2. Stay in their field of vision.

Try to keep your eyes at the same level as their eyes (sit down if she's sitting, stand up if he's standing, compensate for a big difference in height, etc.) and you should be a little further away than normal speaking distance (3-6 feet, 1-2 meters). This helps to make sure they'll see all of your gestures.

If you're indoors, make sure there's enough light for them to see you clearly. If you're outside, face the sun so that there isn't a shadow cast in your face and the sun doesn't glare in theirs. Make sure that the light in the room is shining directly onto your face, and that you're not standing with your back to a light.

Stand directly in front of the person (as opposed to standing off to one side or behind the person).

Don't lean over to talk in their ear. (They can't hear you anyway.) This may be OK for those with minimal hearing loss.

Make sure the person is looking at you. Wait until the person finishes what they're doing before you try to talk to them. If you're showing someone how to use something, for example, you can't talk at the same time as they're looking at the object.

Try not to fidget or move around a lot as you speak. This is distracting and makes it harder for the person to watch what you're saying. We call this "visual noise."

3. Speak your greeting in a normal voice and tone and medium pace.

Whispering or shouting will distort your lip movements, making it difficult for the person to follow your words. Similarly, if you exaggerate your mouth movements you will be harder to understand than if you speak normally. Increasing the volume only helps if the person is able to hear you, and it has the negative effect of drawing attention from other people around you, making the person you are addressing feel self-conscious. If they do not seem to be able to lip-read, you may need to communicate with a notepad and pen. Write your name, greeting, and introduction.

If you have lots of facial hair, it may be harder for a person to lip-read. Don't place anything in or around your mouth (chewing gum, your hands, etc.).

Many people who can understand you perfectly in a quiet room will be unable to do so in, say, a noisy restaurant or wherever the background noise is high or where there is a lot of visual distraction.

4. Establish the gist of what you are going to talk about.

Once they know the general topic, it is easier for them to follow your conversation. Don't change the subject suddenly; even the best lip readers can understand only about 35 percent of what you are saying and must guess the rest in the context of the topic. Pause often and ask if they are following you. Often people with hearing loss will falsely nod to indicate understanding; this is the result of the trauma of isolation.

5. Make eye contact.

You probably don't realize how much you communicate through your eyes and facial expressions. If you have sunglasses on, take them off. If you can add facial expressions to emphasize a point (smiling, rolling your eyes, raising your eyebrows) do so.

6. Use gestures and visual cues.

Point to or hold up any items that you're talking about, and wait until they're looking at you again before you resume speaking. You can also mimic actions, like drinking or jumping or eating, to illustrate your words. Hold up fingers to indicate numbers, scribble in the air to show you're writing a letter, and similar. If the word or phrase you use is not understood, try re-phrasing using different words. Cell phones capable of text messaging/SMS are an excellent tool if you

don't have a pen and paper. You can enter what you wish to say on the phone and show it to a deaf person.

Show your emotions. While you don't want to exaggerate your facial expressions, don't try to hide your emotions as you speak. Facial expressions and emotional cues help people with hearing loss to understand the tone of the conversation.

7. Be polite.

If there is an interruption that the person may not notice, such as the phone ringing or a knock on the door, explain why you are stepping away. Don't make jokes about their hearing (or lack thereof). Don't suddenly refuse to communicate (such as saying "never mind") after you find out that they are deaf. Don't express your irritation when there is a need to repeat yourself. Allow for differences of opinion, just as you would with a hearing friend. If you are talking with a person with hearing loss one-on-one and another hearing person or persons join you, be sure that your companion stays included in the conversation.

Don't assume that persons with hearing loss can't do something because they are deaf. The only thing they can't do is hear. They can drive, fly, travel, work, play, read, act, communicate...

8. Learn sign language.

Greetings and simple phrases like "please," "thank you," and "how are you?" are useful and will help the person feel comfortable and included. It's also really helpful to learn the sign language alphabet.

If the person with hearing loss uses an interpreter, always make sure to look at the person while you talk, not the interpreter. If you are looking at the interpreter, the person with hearing loss will feel like they're not really part of the conversation. This is sometimes a bit difficult, because the person with hearing loss will not be looking at you, but at the interpreter!

Sign languages are natural languages, with their own grammar and syntax; for example, the English phrase "I give to you" is one sign in American Sign Language (ASL). Most countries have their own national sign languages. They are quite distinct to spoken languages and generally do not follow the same geographic distribution (for example, British Sign Language is very different from American Sign Language). Many local colleges, universities and local deaf organizations offer classes for all levels of learners. There are also online classes. Google: free online ASL classes.

Kim Gunderson, the interpreter for UU services, also teaches sign language.