

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING

Adapted from e-Michigan Deaf and Hard of Hearing People www.michdhh.org

Definitions:

- The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) defines a person who is “**deaf**” as someone who is “unable to hear well enough to rely on their hearing and use it as a means of processing information.”
- The term “**Deaf**” (with a capital ‘D’) refers to a group of people who share a language — American Sign Language (ASL) — and a culture.
- “**Hard-of-hearing**” refers to those who have some hearing, are able to use it for communication purposes, and who feel reasonably comfortable doing so.
- “**Late deafened**” refers to a person who has lost their hearing during adulthood.
- “**DeafBlind**” refers to someone who has any degree of both vision and hearing loss. People who are “DeafBlind” may communicate through the entire range of methods that other deaf and hard of hearing people do, depending on the level of residual sight and hearing and the listening situation. Some “DeafBlind” people use assistive hearing devices. Others prefer sign language. Some “DeafBlind” people, who have very limited vision and prefer sign language, will rely on tactile signing (using hands to feel the signs as they are made).

We all prefer to name ourselves, rather than having others label us. It is usually best to wait, allowing a person to make their own statement about their hearing loss. While person-first language is appropriate when speaking of a person with a disability, deaf and hard-of-hearing people may not use this ‘politically correct’ language. It may be a statement of pride and identity when a person says, “I am Deaf.”

General Communication Tips

The following tips will allow a person with hearing loss to effectively use what hearing they have and use visual cues to receive as much information as possible. People with hearing loss often rely on visual cues for information. Some people have difficulty knowing where a sound is coming from. Others hear sounds, but may not be able to recognize the words that were spoken. All of these tips are easy to do, but may require a conscious effort at first.

- **Choose a quiet environment.** Avoid communicating where there is a lot of noise or visual activity. If there is a TV or radio in the room, consider turning it off.
- **Avoid standing in front of a light source when speaking.** The bright light behind you (from a window or desk lamp) will make it harder to see your face. Make sure the light is shining on your face, not behind you.
- **Allow the person with hearing loss to choose their seating first.** Most people know how the environment will help or interfere with communication.

- **Make sure you have the person's attention before speaking.** Waving a hand, or a light touch on the shoulder or arm, is an acceptable way to get attention.
- **Stand a normal distance from the person.**
- **Do not cover your mouth when you are speaking.** This includes covering your mouth with a hand or a long mustache or beard!
- **Do not have anything in your mouth when you are speaking.**
- **Look directly at the person you are speaking to and maintain eye contact.** Do the same when an interpreter is present.
- **Ask the person what will make communication easier.**
- **State the topic of discussion as you begin.** When you change the topic, make sure the listener is aware of the new topic.
- **Speak clearly, at a normal pace.** If you tend to speak quickly, slow down. Do not overly exaggerate or slow your speech at first. If the person has difficulty understanding, slow your speech more, break the sentences into smaller portions, and check for understanding again.
- **Use open-ended questions to check for understanding.**
- **Repeat the statement, then re-phrase if the person is unable to hear the words spoken.**
- **Use shorter, simpler sentences if necessary.**
- **Do not shout.** A loud voice may increase distortion or give the impression you are angry, without improving comprehension.
- **Use gesture, facial expression and body language to assist with communication.**
- **Be patient and take time to communicate.** Saying "never mind" or "it's not important," causes the person with hearing loss to feel they are not important.
- **Be aware of fatigue.** People who are "Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or "DeafBlind"" must work harder to communicate, and this can be extremely tiring.

Communicating with People who are "Hard of Hearing"

The tips listed above are the most important for communicating with someone who is hard of hearing. The following will also help:

- **Remember that hearing loss does not equate with loss of intelligence.**
- **Try writing down a couple words or a phrase to clarify if communication is difficult.**
- **Remember that just because a person can hear your voice, does not mean they can understand your words.** Hearing loss may cause distortion in the way sounds are perceived.
- **Speak naturally and with normal expression.**

- **Quiet places will assist communication.** Be aware of office machines, fans, restaurant noise, and other people’s conversations.
 - **Look directly at the person.** Avoid filling out forms or reading while talking.
 - **In groups, make sure only one person at a time is talking.** Whoever speaks should be sure to have the attention of the person with hearing loss.
 - **Don’t assume that a hard of hearing person is able to understand casual conversation taking place in the room.**
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Communicating with People who are “Deaf, deaf or Late deafened”

- **Do not shout.** If a person is deaf, your voice will not be heard clearly, no matter how loud it is.
 - **When writing back and forth, keep your word choices simple and sentences short.** If the person understands you well and uses more complex sentence and vocabulary, you may do the same. Take your cue from the deaf person.
 - **When using an interpreter, speak directly to the deaf person.** When the interpreter voices what the deaf person signs, look at the deaf person, not the interpreter.
 - **Use pantomime, body language, facial expression.** Patience and kindness will also aid communication.
 - **Don’t be afraid to make mistakes.** Most deaf people are very comfortable communicating with hearing people. Most will appreciate any attempt to communicate, even if you use the wrong sign.
 - **Avoid depending on the TTY or a Relay service to communicate.** Make time to meet the deaf person face-to-face to learn the richness of his or her personality.
 - **For a “late deafened” person, a computer and word processor can be a useful communication tool.** Enlarge the font so it is easy to read. Let the late deafened person speak, and if they don’t understand your speech, type and allow the person to read the computer screen.
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Communicating with People who are “DeafBlind”

- **If signing, keep your signs in a confined space or “box.”** The vision of the person you are speaking with will determine the size of this signing space. This makes it easier for a person with a limited visual field to follow your signs.
- **Stand close to the “DeafBlind” person.** Do not try to communicate from across the room or table.
- **Some people will want to lightly hold a signer’s wrists.** This helps to keep the signs within the visual field and gives additional information.

- **Some “DeafBlind” people will require a specially trained interpreter.** “DeafBlind” interpreters use specific techniques to communicate with “DeafBlind” people.
- **Be aware that support needs vary among “DeafBlind” people.**
- **Always let the person who is “DeafBlind” know you are there.** Approach from the front and gradually move to the side. This gives the person the opportunity to use any residual central or peripheral vision available.
- **If there is no response indicating that the person has seen you; place your hand on the person’s hand or arm and leave it there so that s/he can easily locate you.** Avoid tapping which can be startling.
- **Always identify yourself when approaching someone who is “DeafBlind”.** Make sure the person has understood you.
- **Some “DeafBlind” people will benefit from large print or Braille materials.** Ask which print accommodations are effective.
- **If able to prepare in advance, wear solid color clothing (avoid red) that contrasts with skin color.** Lipstick makes a woman’s lips easier to see.
- **Be especially cautious that communication environments are well lit.** Watch for undue glare or clutter.
- **Be aware that a “DeafBlind” person may need assistance moving around a room.**
- **Avoid leaving a “DeafBlind” person standing in the middle of an open space, or alone in unfamiliar surroundings.** Make sure there is somewhere for the person to sit, or something stationary to have contact with, such as a wall or table.
- **If in doubt, ask the “DeafBlind” person what will be helpful.** This will help to avoid potentially awkward situations.

Communicating During Meetings

The following tips are recommended by the [Michigan Coalition for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People](#) to facilitate communication among a diverse group of Deaf, Hard of Hearing, “DeafBlind”, and hearing people. If we can have successful meetings with everyone participating, so can you!

Michigan Coalition Tips: Meeting Communication Etiquette Tips

- **One speaker at a time.**
- **Wait for the chairperson to identify you by name before speaking.**
- **If print materials are distributed, which have not been provided in advance, allow time for everyone to read the material before making comments.** Material must be read aloud if a person with vision loss is present.

- **When using visual media, such as overheads or PowerPoint presentations, read information aloud for people with vision loss.**
- **Stand and identify yourself if you are signing or using the interpreter.**
- **When speaking wait for the microphone, or go to the microphone.**
- **To take a vote, raise a hand or other visual signal** (The Coalition uses cards with the agency name printed on it).
- **Test Assistive Listening Devices ahead of time rather than during the meeting.** Don't single out a person with hearing loss to ask if they understand.
- **If you must have a side conversation, leave the room.** Show respect for the person who has the floor. (The rule is the same if you are voicing or signing.)
- **Make a point to include people with hearing loss in social and incidental conversations.**
- **Turn off all pagers and cell phones, or use silent notification.**