

# Deaf awareness: Communication made simple

People who experience hearing loss can feel isolated and alone. It is important that the hearing public understand how to interact with deaf people and those who are hard of hearing. It is not difficult to adapt communication, but for those on the receiving end, it can be a breath of fresh air.

An estimated **15 percent** of Americans (37.5 million) have some degree of **hearing loss**.

Based on standard hearing examinations, approximately 1 in 8 people in the United States over the age of 12 have some degree of hearing loss in both ears.

Around 28.8 million adults in the U.S. could benefit from using hearing aids.

Because hearing problems are, by their nature, invisible, the figures above might seem surprisingly high.



As with many types of disability, some people can feel unsure about the best way to communicate and shy away.

In reality, there is nothing to be concerned about. By following some of the basic best practices outlined below, communication with someone who has any level of hearing loss can be smooth for both parties.

Whether you are a medical professional, lawyer, student, office worker, or cashier, you are guaranteed to meet someone with hearing difficulties; making sure the communication process is simple and stress-free will benefit everyone involved.

## Hearing loss and loneliness

Losing one's hearing may cause some people to feel disconnected and lonely. For instance, a study **published in 2015** set out to investigate the reasons for loneliness in older adults (aged 50-94) being treated for hearing loss.

The researchers found that the younger individuals with the greatest degree of hearing loss felt the most lonely. One of the major factors involved in this was difficulties in communication.

**Another study**, published in 2014, concluded that: "Greater hearing loss is associated with increased odds of being socially isolated in a nationally representative sample of women aged 60 to 69 years."

These findings underscore the importance of deaf awareness. By understanding the challenges and ensuring communication is easy, any individual who feels isolated is given the opportunity to feel included.

Below are a few **things to consider** when communicating with someone who is deaf or hard of hearing.

## Faces, distractions, and emotions

This might sound obvious, but do not begin talking if the individual is not looking at you; in conversation with hearing people, we often talk before we have someone's attention. The sound of your voice signals the start of an interaction. However, if someone is reliant on facial expressions and lipreading to communicate, they will be on the back foot if they turn around and you are already mid-sentence.

While talking, make sure not to turn away; again, this might be an obvious point, but it is worth remembering that if a person who relies on lipreading cannot see your mouth, it will be very difficult for them to follow the conversation. Maintain eye contact.

**Don't cover your mouth** - as above, this might seem like a no-brainer, but in daily conversation, we often cover our mouths partially, or in passing, as we speak.

Be aware of your face and keep it clear of distractions. Similarly, wearing distracting jewelry around the face or a particularly loud shirt, playing with your hair, or fiddling with buttons can take some of the emphasis away from the face.

**Use facial expressions to show emotions** - because someone who is deaf will not benefit from changes in the intonation of your voice, they rely on facial expressions to gauge the emotional content of a conversation.

There is no need to become an actor, but if you are saying something positive, smile and vice versa.

It is important to note that, just because someone is wearing hearing aids, it does not mean that they can hear everything in the same way that you can. Depending on the level of hearing loss, individuals receive a varied spectrum of sound.

## Using your voice

**Use a normal speaking pace** - some people increase their talking rate when they are nervous, others might assume that speaking very slowly will be helpful.

**Don't exaggerate lip movements** - it is tempting to think that by exaggerating the movements of the mouth, it will help make words seem clearer. The opposite is true.

As above, deaf people are used to reading the lips of people speaking naturally, not dragging out their words. And, of course, try not to mumble for the same reasons.

**Don't shout** - if someone is profoundly deaf, no amount of volume will make your words audible; if someone is using hearing aids, shouting can be painful

and the sound can become distorted. Also, it is difficult to shout without coming across as aggressive.

In conversation, we all use verbal nods such as "uh huh." These are, of course, inaudible and should be replaced by a nod and a smile when we understand. This confirmation will build confidence in both directions.



## Choosing the environment

When hearing people have a conversation, they might choose to stand in a location that is not too loud. In the same way, people who are hard of hearing will appreciate a quieter location. The human brain is a master at filtering out the most important sounds in an environment. Hearing aids do not always afford the same level of filtering, making a noisy location very difficult to communicate in.

Other than noise, lighting is also important. For instance, if a strong light is positioned behind you, the other person will have to strain to make out the subtle movements of your mouth and face. It is best to make sure that your face is well lit.

**If you are in a dark room, put a light on; if the sun is in the other person's eyes, switch positions.**

Visually distracting environments can make it hard for a lipreader to focus on the speaker. If cars are speeding past, if groups of children are moving between you, if there is any type of mass distraction, communication will become more difficult.

Lipreading takes an incredible amount of mental energy, it is important that this energy is not wasted on trying to ignore extraneous information.

## General conversational tips

**Gaining attention** - before beginning to speak, make sure to get the other person's attention, perhaps by **tapping them on their arm** or waving.

Someone who is hard of hearing relies on the context of a conversation to make assumptions about the topic and content. Because not every word can be picked up, a lot of effort goes into second guessing and building a picture of the conversation without explicitly "hearing" each word.

**Get to the point** - When speaking with someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, try to get to the point and use plain language. For instance, in a conversation with a hearing friend we might say something like "if you feel like it, or if you aren't too busy, later today, or perhaps tomorrow, we could maybe get together and go to the mall?"

The meaning of that sentence only becomes clear at the end. For someone who is lipreading, this is a great deal of extra work for no good reason. Instead, say "would you like to go to the mall today or tomorrow?"

**Don't all speak at once** - when hearing people have a discussion in a group, more than one person might speak at the same time or, at least, overlap.

For people who can hear, this is no problem, but if someone is heavily reliant on visual aspects of communication, this can be very difficult to follow.

Individuals with hearing aids may also struggle in these situations; we take it for granted that we can pinpoint the location of a sound in space with ease, but this is a highly technical ability that the hearing aid cannot fully replicate.

Because it is more difficult to gauge where a sound is coming from, if everyone speaks at once, a conversation will be tough to follow.

Also, switching topics without warning can be confusing. Make sure that the other person has understood before moving on.

The most important tip is this - **don't give up**. If you think that you are not being understood, don't just stop making an effort. Keep trying, but don't simply repeat the same words over and over again - rephrase it, say it in a different way.

**If you end up saying "oh, don't worry, it doesn't matter" it feels like you mean "you don't matter."**

If you panic, you may both panic, and a level of understanding is less likely to be achieved. If you feel you are stuck, using a pen and paper can be very useful, or typing a word or phrase into your phone can be a simple way to ensure everyone is on the same page.

