

DE ANZA COLLEGE
DEAF SERVICES

COMMUNICATION: WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

How will I communicate with a deaf person?

Will he or she be able to understand me? Will I understand what is going on? These are a few of the questions frequently asked by hearing people regarding communication with a deaf or hard-of-hearing person.

Communication is not necessarily hard or easy; there is no formula for success because different individuals are involved and the circumstances will vary. There is, however, basic knowledge that can enhance communication.

As stated previously, a deaf or hard-of-hearing person develops communication abilities according to various influences. Consequently, deaf and hard-of-hearing people will communicate in different ways at different levels of understandability to you. Some will use speech only; some will use a combination of sign language, fingerspelling and speech; some will write; some will use body language and facial expression to supplement their interactions.

As a hearing person, you may have apprehensions about meeting a deaf or hard-of-hearing person. Don't worry – your concerns are natural. Remember that we all feel uncomfortable in unfamiliar situations.

The key is to find out which combination of techniques works best to communicate with a particular deaf or hard-of-hearing person. You may have to experiment and try several different communication techniques. It will depend on what you feel comfortable with and what works for you. The important thing is not how you exchange ideas or feelings, but that you communicate.

Communication Tips

Listed below are a few specific techniques that can help those who do not know how to communicate in sign language:

One-to-One Communication:

1. Get the deaf person's attention before speaking. Since deaf people can't hear the usual call to attention, they may need a tap on the shoulder, a wave, or another visual signal. Try to avoid stamping your feet or pounding on the table. These tend to be less effective ways of getting attention and even when successful, may be startling or jarring.
2. Speak slowly and clearly. Exaggeration and over-emphasis of words distort lip movements making speechreading more difficult. Not all deaf people have speech reading skills. **Only about 25% of speech is visible on the lips.** Even the best speechreaders can't read everything, so they must try to pick-up some contextual clues to fill-in some of the gaps.

3. Look directly at the person when you speak. Even a slight turn of your head can obscure the deaf person's view. Other distracting factors affecting communication include mustaches that cover the lips, smoking, pencil chewing and putting your hands in front of your face.
4. Don't be embarrassed about communicating using paper and pencil. Getting the message across is more important than the medium used.
5. Maintain eye contact with the deaf person. Eye contact helps convey the feeling of direct communication. Speak directly to the deaf person as you would a hearing person. This gives the deaf person a chance to make eye contact when looking at you for lipreading cues or facial expressions.
6. If you are having some difficulty getting an idea across, try to rephrase a thought or restate a sentence rather than repeating the same exact words. Sometimes a particular group of lip movements is difficult to speechread.
7. Use pantomime, body language and facial expressions to facilitate communication.
8. Try to avoid standing in front of a light source, such as a window. The bright background and silhouette created on the face make it almost impossible to speechread.

Group Situations and Meetings

These tips are useful when working with deaf individuals in group situations. Many of these suggestions may be helpful for communicating effectively with hearing people as well:

1. Use visual aids. They can be a tremendous help to both deaf and hearing persons. Vision is a deaf person's primary channel for receiving information. Where appropriate, you might consider using overhead projectors, whiteboards, films, diagrams, charts, and other visual media. When selecting films and videotapes, make sure they are already captioned or have subtitles.
2. Be aware that it is impossible to speechread a person from the side, the back, or if the speaker is in motion. Lecturing while writing on the whiteboard and pacing around the room prevents the deaf person, who may depend on lipreading, from understanding your information.
3. Try to slow down the pace of communication slightly. This often helps to facilitate understanding. Many people tend to speak quickly, seldom pausing. Try to allow time for the deaf person to assimilate the information and respond.