

Get Connected to Deaf, Deafened and Hard of Hearing People: A Guide for Service Providers and Businesses

THE CANADIAN HEARING SOCIETY
LA SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE DE L'OUÏE



Ontario



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Introduction

23 per cent of adult Canadians report experiencing some hearing loss – that's nearly one out of every four people who comes into your business, facility or organization. As baby boomers age, the incidence and impact of hearing loss will increase dramatically.

Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people face systemic barriers to communication and information everyday. But you can easily make a difference by removing these barriers in your organization. By making good communication the standard, you will broaden your market base, increase business and profits and avoid costly errors due to miscommunication. A March 1998 article in Fortune Magazine shows that of people with disabilities:

- * 48 per cent are principal shoppers for their household
- * 46 per cent are married
- * 77 per cent have no children – increasing their disposable income
- * 58 per cent own their own homes

By equipping yourself and your staff in advance with simple and appropriate communication techniques when serving a person with hearing loss, you will avoid misunderstandings that can result in emotional distress, misinformation or embarrassment. Good communication makes good business sense.

Communication is a two-way street: When people face barriers to communication with you, you in turn face barriers to communication with them. By putting accommodations in place to help you communicate better with people who have a hearing loss, barriers are swept aside and you can 'get connected'.

In addition to just being the right thing to do, clear communication is also the legal right of deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people.

The Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, Canadian Human Rights Commission, provincial Human Rights Commissions and Supreme Court of Canada rulings mandate the legal responsibility for an organization, business or facility to be accessible. In Ontario, the Policy and Guidelines on Disability and the Duty to Accommodate is included in the Ontario Human Rights Code, to ensure equal participation of all Ontarians.

From the perspective of customer service, this means that deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people should enjoy the same level of respect, dignity and service as hearing customers.

This article will introduce you to the needs and issues important to people who are deaf, deafened and hard of hearing and will provide you with information and resources to help you implement barrier-free communication.

Terminology & Definitions

Hearing loss ranges from mild to profound. The distinctions between the terms “deaf”, “Deaf”, “deafened” and “hard of hearing” are based principally on the individual’s preferred language (spoken or sign) rather than on the actual degree of hearing loss. Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing individuals may use hearing aids, cochlear implants or other assistive listening devices.

Deaf

This term is generally used to describe individuals with a severe to profound hearing loss, with little or no residual hearing. Some deaf people use sign language, such as American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ) to communicate. Others use speech to communicate using their residual hearing and hearing aids, technical devices or cochlear implants, and/or speechreading.

Culturally Deaf

This term refers to individuals who identify with and participate in the language, culture and community of Deaf people, based on sign language. Deaf culture does not perceive hearing loss and deafness from a pathological point of view, but rather from a socio-cultural point of view, indicated by a capital D as in “Deaf culture”. Culturally Deaf people may also use speech, residual hearing, hearing aids, speechreading and gesturing to communicate with people who do not sign.

Deafened or late-deafened

These terms describe individuals who grow up hearing or hard of hearing and, either suddenly or gradually, experience a profound loss of hearing. Late-deafened adults usually cannot understand speech without visual clues such as captioning/computerized notetaking, speechreading or sign language.

Hard of hearing

This term is generally used to describe individuals who use spoken language (their residual hearing and speech) to communicate. Most hard of hearing people can understand some speech sounds with or without hearing aids and often supplement their residual hearing with speechreading, hearing aids and technical devices. The term “person with hearing loss” is increasingly used and preferred.

Language Options

Spoken Language

Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing people who use spoken language speak for themselves. Their residual hearing is often augmented by hearing aid(s), cochlear implant, or other assistive listening devices and/or speechreading.

Sign Language

The language of the majority of North American culturally Deaf people is American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is a living and fully formed visual language. ASL has its own grammar and syntax (word order) distinct from spoken language.

Sign languages are rich languages capable of expressing the same scope of thoughts, feelings, intentions and complexities as spoken languages. Meaning is conveyed through signs that are composed of specific movements and shapes of the hand and arms, eyes, face, head and body posture. There are more than 100 sign languages in the world today. In Canada the two main sign languages are American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ).

Communication Strategies

Speechreading

Speechreading uses visual cues to understand a spoken message. The speechreader watches a speaker's lips, teeth and tongue, along with many other cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, context and body language. When used alone, the effectiveness of lipreading varies since more than half the movements involved in sound formation occur within the mouth and cannot be detected by the eye. 40 to 60 per cent of English words are homophenes (words which look identical on a speaker's face) and there is not a single sound that has a distinct lip/jaw movement/position of its own. 33 to 35 per cent of speechreading is lipreading. A person's skill at speechreading depends on many factors including visual acuity, personality and when hearing loss occurred. Speechreading is most successful when used in conjunction with other communication strategies.

Real-Time Captioning

Real-time captioning includes stenographic and laptop computer technology. A captionist types simultaneously what is spoken, which is displayed on a laptop computer monitor or projected to a large screen and read by the deaf, deafened or hard of hearing person. Captionists bring and set up their own equipment.

Sign Language Interpreter Services

Professional sign language interpreters are knowledgeable in the language and culture of both Deaf and hearing people and provide communication in both a sign language and a spoken language e.g. ASL and spoken English. (OIS, OASLI, AVLIC)

When the exchange of information is complex, such as during a job interview or medical appointment, when arranging a mortgage or reporting a crime, the most effective way

to communicate with a person who is Deaf is through a professional sign language interpreter. For everyday interactions – ordering at a restaurant, shopping, banking or registering for a hotel room – writing back and forth will usually work. Follow the person's cue to find out if s/he prefers sign language, gesturing, writing or speaking.

Reading and Writing Notes

Writing back and forth on paper or typing back and forth using a keyboard and display [computer, TTY] is handy. One risk is that written messages are abbreviated, which can result in incomplete communication. If care is used to avoid this, written- or typed-and-read communication works well for deaf and deafened people, some who rely heavily on this communication strategy.

When writing back and forth use straightforward, conversational language stating your point clearly. English (or French) is not the first language of all Canadians. The majority of culturally Deaf people function to a great extent bilingually – they are proficient, to a greater or lesser degree, in written English (or French) and ASL (or LSQ). ASL and LSQ do not have written forms and sometimes the written skills of a person whose first language is a sign language might appear stilted. A person's written English (or French) skill should not be perceived as an indicator of education, ability or intelligence.

Technology

Technology has opened up a new world of communication for people with hearing loss. It has leveled the playing field for deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people in terms of access, with a wide range of assistive listening devices and technical devices available to assist the communication process. Examples include access to: telephone through technology such as TTYs, phone amplifiers, ringers and visual signaling devices; e-mail through e-pagers; television through captioning; alarms through visual signaling devices; and meetings from remote areas through videoconferencing.

Technical devices that can help you communicate with people who are deaf, deafened or hard of hearing.

Pocket Talker is a portable one-to-one communication device to assist conversation with a hard of hearing person who is not wearing a hearing aid. The speaker talks into the lapel microphone. The sound is then carried directly to the headset of the hard of hearing person, which minimizes background noises.

Amplified phones and separate phone amplifiers are available to augment the sound on a conventional phone.

An adapter is available that connects the phone to an input jack on cochlear implant processors.

Volume control can be added to phones, including public phones, through a portable amplifier (a device that attaches to any phone) or by means of a built-in device.

Signaling devices are used to signal or alert the person with hearing loss that an important sound is occurring: the telephone ringing, someone at the door (of a house, office or meeting room, hotel room, etc.), the fire alarm, or the baby crying.

TTYs are telephones that consist of a keyboard and small display screen allowing communication over the phone lines via typed conversation. Some TTYs are used in conjunction with conventional phones, others plug directly into the phone jack. Public pay phones can be equipped with TTYs.

If both the caller and the receiver have a TTY, the call can take place directly person to person. If one of the parties does not have a TTY, they can communicate through a telephone relay operator using a toll-free number. The operator acts as a communication link by typing what the hearing person says so that it appears as written text on the TTY screen and voicing what the TTY user types.

Voice Carry Over (VCO) is another relay operator service. TTY users speak for themselves and use the TTY to read the response. VCO works with a conventional phone and a TTY as well as with phones equipped with the VCO feature.

E-mail technology, including E-paging, has connected deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people, both personally and professionally. E-mail communication is a valuable tool for instant, inexpensive access to people and information.

Closed Captioning (CC) Decoders are used to access captioning on television. All TVs over 13" in size manufactured after 1993 have built-in decoder circuitry. Separate decoders are available for older televisions. The majority of TV programs and movies are closed captioned and, within a few years, all programming will be closed captioned. Training, PR and promotional videos can be captioned to make them accessible.

Communication Tips

Sign language interpreters, captioning, assistive listening devices and technical devices can help to create a service or facility accessible to deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people. There are many ways to optimize communication with deaf, deafened or hard of hearing people. When in doubt, ask the person you are speaking with for suggestions to improve communication.

The Environment

- * The best spot to communicate is one that is quiet and well lit
- * The light source should be on your face, rather than behind you to make speechreading easier
- * Eliminate background noise, including hallway traffic

Technical Tips

- Write down key phrases and words
- Take advantage of technical devices that improve communication, such as the Pocket Talker
- In meetings, use amplification, interpreters, captioning, flip charts, note-writing and other aids to communication

Interpreting

- Use professional, qualified sign language interpreters, and avoid, if possible, using unqualified, untrained, well-intentioned 'signers' or friends/family to fill the role of interpreter

Personal Communication

- Talk to the deaf, deafened and hard of hearing person, not about him or her
- Make and maintain eye contact
- Face the person and communicate with him or her, not the interpreter
- Keep your face clear for speechreading. Eliminate obstacles in front of your face (e.g. your hands, flowers), avoid chewing gum and be aware that moustaches and beards can hinder speechreading for some people
- Your visual attention, facial expressions and physical contact are all very important in creating a bond between you and the deaf, deafened or hard of hearing person
- * Keep facial expressions consistent with your feelings and emotions; this is what the deaf, deafened and hard of hearing person sees and interprets. If deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people sense inconsistencies, it will confuse the communication
 - * Get the person's attention before you speak, i.e. use visual attention-getting strategies when calling a deaf, deafened or hard of hearing person (in a waiting room, office, meeting); tap the person's shoulder to attract attention if his/her back is turned
- Don't shout; speak clearly and distinctly, and at a moderate pace
- Give clues when changing the conversation subject
- Rephrase, rather than repeat, when you are not understood
- Avoid startling or frightening a person by doing anything unexpected from behind
- Don't restrict the person's hands. They are needed for writing and/or signing purposes
- Do not indulge in side chat; although reassuring to hearing people, side conversation may cause deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people to feel they are missing important information
- If you have trouble understanding a person with a hearing loss, ask him or her to repeat what they have said
- If you receive a relay call (link), the operator will identify it as such. Take the call and be familiar with how to use the service. This is how deaf or hard of hearing people call to order a pizza, find out what hours you are open, make appointments or reservations
- Patience and flexibility are important when establishing communication with a deaf, deafened or hard of hearing person

Emergency Situations

Quick recognition that someone is deaf or hard of hearing is important to ensure appropriate actions are taken in emergency situations. In an emergency it is easy to forget that not everybody can hear you.

Be it a medical situation, one involving police, fire or other need for immediate communications with a deaf, deafened or hard of hearing person, sensitivity to the communication needs of the person is paramount to ensure the safety and security of everyone.

Be prepared to:

- * use alternative ways of communicating
- * ask questions (in writing) such as:
 - Are you deaf?
 - Do you use sign language?
 - Do you want an interpreter?
 - Can you speak?
 - Do you read lips?
 - Can we write back and forth?
 - contact interpreter services
 - use assistive listening devices
 - communicate in a well-lit area and do not restrict the person's hands (needed for signing, writing or gesturing)
 - respect the person's preferred way of communicating

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Frequently Asked Questions

How will I know if people are deaf, deafened or hard of hearing?

They may:

- * tell you (using spoken language) that they have a hearing loss and recommend the best way to communicate
- * point to their ear and shake their head
- * use a note pad and pencil or make writing motions in the air
- * move their lips without making any sound
- * speak with a noticeably unmodulated voice
- * point to their hearing aid or cochlear implant
- * use gestures
- * have contacted you through a telephone relay service, interpreter services or a third party, identifying themselves as deaf or having a hearing loss
- * be accompanied by an interpreter or have requested an interpreter be booked for the appointment
- * present a COMMUNICARD* indicating a hearing loss

I'm afraid I am going to say the wrong thing. How do I speak to a customer or employee with a hearing loss?

Speaking to or working with a person with hearing loss should be easy and straightforward. Speak directly to the individual. Feel free to use words such as "hear" or "sounds" as these are words people use everyday. If you keep the "put people first" rule in mind, instead of putting the hearing loss first, it's easy to feel comfortable. If you are meeting with a deaf individual with the assistance of interpreter services, speak directly to the deaf person and not to the interpreter. Avoid saying "tell him", "let her know that".

Ask the deaf, deafened or hard of hearing person to identify his or her preferred language of communication. This will depend on personal preference, degree of hearing loss, the age of onset, personality, educational background and background in language. S/he may communicate in spoken language or in sign language. In addition s/he may use communication strategies, such as speechreading, reading and writing notes, technical devices or a combination of these. Or s/he may already have accommodations in place such as interpreter or captioning services.

What words should I use to refer to someone with a hearing loss?

Use: persons or people with hearing loss, people who are deaf, deafened and hard of hearing, Deaf people

Instead of: hearing impaired, normal or abnormal hearing, deaf and dumb, deaf mute

How many people have a hearing loss?

23 per cent of adult Canadians report experiencing some hearing loss. The average age of those who report having hearing loss is 51. One in four of those who report being affected are under 40; 45 per cent are between 40 and 60 years old.

How many people are culturally Deaf and use sign language?

Approximately 300,000 Canadians use sign language as their first language.

What is Deaf Culture?

Language and culture grow and evolve together. With ASL and Deaf culture, there is a sense of pride in one's identity and a strong sense of belonging. Customs, rules of behaviour, traditions, values, norms, histories and folklore weave together to form a rich culture. Deaf culture does not perceive hearing loss and deafness from a pathological point of view, but rather from a socio-cultural point of view, indicated by a capital D as in "Deaf culture".

Rules of behaviour include visual strategies for attention-getting (touching, waving, vibration or light signaling), eye contact, introduction protocol (how one is related to the Deaf community, where s/he grew up, who do they know in common), long farewells, communication discourse that is direct and to the point, and the use of visual communication (body language, facial expression).

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