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WORKING WITH SPECIFIC NEEDS

Tips for Speaking to the Hearing Impaired

Successful communication can only happen when all people are fully involved in a conversation. That makes hearing loss an invisible disability. Although there may be hearing impaired persons around, you may not always know who they are.

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I am a hearing-impaired person who has spent a lifetime coping with hearing loss. As a result of engaging with this loss, I became a Sound Practitioner, Singer and Sound Researcher, (among other things), and have spent a good deal of time excavating the information around hearing loss and communication as a healing process for myself.

Healing loss can be extremely lonely and isolating. As a child I felt so alone and despairing much of the time, without ever knowing why. I recently dedicated my doctoral dissertation to my hero, Helen Keller. She survived the triple alienation of the loss of sound, sight, and speech, and victoriously learned to communicate and connect to the world around her - and most importantly, to herself.

We all have this journey from alienation to reconnection in our lives in some way. This article offers analysis and tips on the importance of connecting through communication with the hearing-impaired people in your life. It also hopes to serve as a general encouragement for all of us to advocate for what we need to connect with the people in our environment.

Successful communication can only happen when all people are fully involved in a conversation. That makes hearing loss an invisible disability. Although there may be hearing impaired persons around, you may not always know who they are. You may assume that a hearing-impaired person is ignoring you if they don't respond when you speak. Take courage and repeat yourself—they may not even know that you are talking, especially if the environment is noisy. Speech-reading (also called lip reading) is a building block that helps a hearing-impaired person understand spoken words. The hearing-impaired person can often understand what a speaker is saying by watching their mouth and face. About 40% of the sounds in the English language can be seen on the lips of a speaker as long as the conditions are right. You may notice that your hearing-impaired friends or family focus more intensely on your face when you are speaking—that is because you can hear while you are looking in any direction, but they cannot. They must be face to face with you.

Yet there are many words that can't be speech-read. Even the most skilled speech readers might be able to understand only half of the words in a sentence. So



other clues become very important for understanding speech. Hearing impaired persons have special needs when conversing with you. Although they may use hearing aids and speech reading, it is still important for you to use good communication strategies.

Of course, you can imagine what wearing a mask during the pandemic has done to the communication abilities of the hearing impaired—it has been a long, unpleasant and exhausting struggle to stay connected. So follow the CDC guidelines in your neighborhood and stay safe, but keep in mind that when you are masked, the hearing impaired cannot really hear you, and may miss important instructions.

However, you can still help them hear and understand what you are saying. Here are some tips for speaking to the hearing impaired. I have bolded the few that I personally have found to be the most crucial:

- Face the person. If possible, sit or stand at their level and make sure that you are in good light. See that the light is shining on your face, rather than into their eyes, and avoid being backed by a bright window that will cast your face into darkness.
- Look directly at the hearing-impaired person's face and make sure they are looking back at you.
- Stand or sit 3 to 6 feet away from the hearing-impaired person.
- Start by speaking the hearing-impaired person's name. It will help them to focus on you and reduces the risk that they will miss what you have to say.
- Introduce the general topic or change or subject. Be aware that if you suddenly change the subject, the hearing-impaired person cannot easily follow. When the subject does change, let the hearing-impaired person know what you are talking about now. State the most important facts before continuing.
- Politely repeat the most important keywords to convey your meaning.
- Speak clearly, slowly, and naturally.
- Project your voice. Use the octave that will send your voice out the furthest. Is that a low sound or a high sound?
- Avoid shouting. Shouting will cause sound distortion and may make speech reading more difficult. If the person is wearing a hearing aid, they can experience extreme discomfort if you shout.
- Use body movements and hand gestures to express your meaning.
- Keep your hands away from your face. If you cover your lips by eating, chewing, or smoking, it will be harder for the hearing-impaired person to speech-read.
- If you wear a beard or mustache, the hearing-impaired person may have difficulty seeing your mouth to speech-read.
- If you wear sunglasses it will be harder for the hearing-impaired person to understand your meaning since they cannot see your eyes.
- If you know that the hearing-impaired person can hear better in one ear than the other, try to position yourself near the better ear.
- Most hearing-impaired people have more difficulty understanding speech when there is background noise. Try to reduce noise from television, radio or other devices when talking to them. Many hearing-impaired people are very sensitive to sound. If possible, meet in a quiet space where there is little activity or noise.
- If the hearing-impaired person is unable to understand you, do not keep repeating the same words. Try again using different words.



- When giving factual information such as numbers, time, or place, ask the hearing impaired person to repeat the information back to you. You can also write the information down for them.
- Remember that hearing impaired people may have more difficulty hearing and comprehending information when they are not feeling well.
- Do not try to speak to the hearing-impaired person from another room. They cannot speech-read from a distance and may have trouble understanding what you say.
- Pay attention to the person's facial expressions. If they look puzzled it may mean that they do not understand something you said. Politely ask if they have understood you, or ask questions to check if they heard you correctly.
- Take turns speaking during the conversation and do not interrupt.
- Never talk about the hearing-impaired person as if they are not there.
- If you call a hearing-impaired person, good phone technique will help them hear as much of the conversation as possible. Speak directly into the phone but do not place your mouth to it too closely. Keep background noise as low as you can.
- When talking on the phone with a hearing-impaired person, make sure they know who you are and what the conversation is about. Speak clearly and slowly and be ready to repeat what you say. Conversing on the phone can be difficult for a hearing-impaired person. They will appreciate your patience.

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- If possible, plan on spending time with the hearing-impaired person, so you are not tempted to rush the conversation.
- Be sure that the hearing-impaired person sees you as you approach. Approach from the front, within their line of vision to avoid startling them.
- Ask one question at a time. More than one question may cause confusion.
- Do not walk away until you are sure that the conversation is over.
- Avoid talking quickly or using long sentences. Slow down your speech. Pause and make sure that the person has understood what you just said before going further. 🗣️

Resources:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). Speech reading. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/parentsguide/building/speech-reading.html>
2. Eldercareonline.com. (2020). Communicating with impaired elderly persons. <https://www.ec-online.net/Knowledge/Articles/communication.html>
3. Hearinglink.org. (2020). How to communicate with a hearing-impaired person. <https://www.hearinglink.org/living/partners-children-family-hearing-people/how-to-communicate-with-a-hearing-impaired-person/>
4. Medline Plus. (2020). Talking to someone with hearing loss. <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000361.htm>
5. UCSF Health. (2020). Communicating with people with hearing loss. <https://www.ucsfhealth.org/education/communicating-with-people-with-hearing-loss>



Learn more about author Elizabeth Krasnoff by visiting her website at:

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