Overview

The ability to communicate defines us as human beings and as a society. It forms a foundation for decision making and relationship building. Communicating with deaf or hard of hearing individuals is an achievable goal, even when accommodations (e.g., interpreters) are not present. The tools available to us are considerable and limited only by our desire to communicate and our creativity.

Do all individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing communicate in the same way?

There is no "one size fits all" approach to communication, nor is there a "typical" individual who is deaf or hard of hearing. Each individual is unique and brings their own set of communication needs and preferences, based upon the setting and the purpose of the interaction.

Determining how to communicate effectively is a joint effort shared by both parties: the individual who is deaf or hard of hearing and the hearing individual. Trial and error until an effective communication solution is achieved is often the rule rather than the exception. Flexibility and creativity are key.

When meeting an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing for the first time it is important not to make assumptions about an individual's communication. Rather, inquire directly with the individual about their communication needs. Bridging deaf/hearing communication is a daily occurrence for individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing; as such, they are always your best counsel. Writing, gestures, speech, sign language, technology, and visual aids are all possibilities to be explored.

What are some ways individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing communicate in their daily lives?

Broadly defined, communication for deaf and hard of hearing individuals occurs through visual, auditory or tactile modes (for individuals who are deaf-blind). Common visual-communication modes include American Sign Language (ASL), Cued Speech, speech reading (lip reading), and gestures. Auditory communication includes utilizing residual hearing and spoken English received through the ear, often augmented with a hearing aid or cochlear implant to enhance the ability to interpret sound. Tactile communication translates visual and auditory communication into the hand and other parts of the body.

How does a setting impact communication?

Effective visual communication relies on a user-friendly setting. Factors such as background noise, lighting, pace of conversation, number of speakers, accents and facial hair all influence how the individual chooses to communicate. However, settings are not limited to only physical space. The individual's familiarity with the subject matter and the availability of visual prompts, such as pictures and charts also guide the communication method.

Hearing aids and cochlear implants will not restore hearing to "normal." While some users are able to use a telephone or recognize music, others are only able to pick up on environmental sounds. It is important to remember that these devices do not enable an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing to hear at "normal" hearing levels.

Communicating with Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Tips for communicating

- Get the attention of the individual who is deaf or hard of hearing before speaking. If the individual does not respond to the spoken name, a tap on shoulder or another visual signal is appropriate.
- Provide a written outline of the main topics to be discussed. This is especially helpful for individuals who depend on speech reading to pick up on key words in a conversation.
- Speak clearly and at a normal pace; do not yell or over enunciate.
- Look directly at the individual while speaking.
- Do not cover your mouth or look around while speaking.
- Avoid standing in front of a light source. The backlighting or glare can make it difficult to see your face clearly.
- If you need to repeat, rephrase the thought. Some words are harder to understand than others; rephrasing allows for opportunities to understand what was previously missed.
- Use visual aids, gestures, and body language when appropriate. The old saying that one picture is worth a thousand words is very true.
- Do not be afraid to use pen and pencil or texting as a tool.
- Use open-ended questions to allow for more opportunities for both parties to check each other's understanding of a topic.

How can I enhance communication in large group situations?

Communication access is not limited to one-on-one conversations. While these types of conversation are easier to negotiate, there are a number of strategies one can use to enhance communication in large group settings.

- Use name tags for group interactions with unfamiliar people. It is much easier to associate a name to a face when it's readily available to the eye.
- In group meetings establish turn-taking rules, whereby everyone raises their hand before speaking and waits until they are called upon before engaging.
- Allow extra time for one-on-one conversations on new topics.
- Learn a few simple words in sign language such as please, thank you, and how to say your name. Simple gestures like being willing to communicate in another person's native language enhance personal and professional relationships.
- Include individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing in social activities, group events, and "grapevine" news. Some ways to share this information include using written announcements, text messaging, and e-mail.

Only about 30% of English speech sounds are visible on the mouth under the best of conditions. Some of the factors that can go into speechreading include residual hearing, watching body language and facial expressions, distance from the speaker and being aware of the topic under discussion. Communication or conversations may be easier one-on-one in a quiet setting, but more difficult in a group or in a noisy environment.

For more information on communication and the Deaf Community, please read the Fast Fact titled *Deaf Community*.

Resources

Access: The Fundamentals - https://dcmp.org/learn/469-access-the-fundamentals-module

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