

Communicating with Deaf Individuals

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 individuals is both considerable and limited only by our desires.

Do all deaf individuals communicate in the same way?

There is no “one size fits all” solution. Determining how to communicate effectively is a joint effort shared by both the deaf individual and the hearing individual.

Trial and error until an effective communicating with deaf individuals solution is achieved is often the rule rather than the exception. Flexibility and creativity are key.

When meeting a deaf person 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 deaf people; as such, they are always your best counsel. Writing, gestures, speech, sign language, technology, and visual aids are all possibilities to be explored.

How do deaf individuals communicate in their daily lives?

Broadly defined, communication for deaf individuals occurs through visual, auditory or tactile modes (for individuals who are deafblind). 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 a deaf individual to hear at “normal” hearing levels.

