

Communicating with a Person with a Hearing Loss



A hearing loss may be congenital, meaning a person is born with the disability, or acquired later in life. It may happen suddenly, or gradually. Several terms are used to describe people who have a hearing loss: deaf, deafened, hard-of-hearing and culturally deaf.

Use the right words

- Deaf (upper case 'D') refers to members of a socio-linguistic and cultural group of people who use sign language to communicate. In Canada, there are two main sign languages, American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des Signes Québécois (LSQ).
- Hard-of-hearing refers to people who have a hearing loss from mild to severe. Hearing aids may be used, or other technical devices.
- Deafened describes people who grew up hearing or hard-of-hearing who suddenly or gradually lose their hearing. They rely on visual forms of communication such as speechreading, text, and occasionally, sign language.

Tips to Create a Good Communication Environment

- Take time to communicate for success. Reduce any background noise as much as possible and try to visit in a distraction-free environment. Seek out a quiet place to communicate.
- Ensure the lighting is good.
- Always speak face-to-face, never with your back to the person.

Tips to Communicate Effectively with a Person with a Hearing Loss

- Attract the person's attention before a visit. Never approach a person with a hearing loss from behind when you're visiting with a therapy dog. Avoid doing anything unexpected or surprising from behind which might be frightening.
- Allow extra time for communication.
- Speak clearly with a well-projected voice. Do not shout. Come closer to the person, if necessary.
- If the person has a severe or profound hearing loss, you may wish to bring photos, illustrations and a pen and paper to facilitate better communication.
- Facial expression, gestures and body language can substitute for tone of voice.
- If you are working with a sign language interpreter, be sure to speak directly to the person with the hearing loss, not the interpreter. Make sure you have fully communicated before the interpreter has left the room.

- Do not indulge in side chat. People with a hearing loss may feel they are missing important information.
- Take care not to put your hands on your face. It makes speechreading more challenging. Beards and moustaches also make communication for challenging because it is harder for the person with a hearing loss to read your lips.
- Give clues when changing the conversation subject. Sudden shifts in topic can be confusing.
- Rephrase rather than repeat information when you cannot be understood, or write it down if appropriate.

Hearing Ear Dogs

These are small to medium sized dogs especially trained to alert people who are hard of hearing to important sounds. These dogs respond to a telephone ring, a door bell or a baby crying, for instance, and lead the handler to the source of the noise. These dogs are recognized internationally by a bright orange harness that is stencilled with 'Hearing Ear Dogs of Canada'. Therapy dog teams should never approach a hearing ear dog while the animal is working.

For further information, check out these useful websites:

The Canadian Hearing Society at www.chs.ca
Hearing Ear Dogs of Canada at www.dogguides.com
Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services at www.mcsc.gov.on.ca

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OTD Toolbox Infosheet #6:



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Good dogs doing great work!

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