Working with people who are Deaf or hard of hearing

Best practice principles for working with people who are Deaf or hard of hearing

When working with people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, it is recommended to use the following best practice principles.

- Respect and be sensitive to the varied cultures, backgrounds, beliefs and values within the Deaf community.
- Take time to learn about the individual you are working with—not all people with a hearing loss have had similar life experiences.
- Never say it doesn't matter when you are experiencing communication difficulties—communication does matter, it is the basis on which positive relationships are built.
- Some people will not feel comfortable communicating with you in public, either orally or via sign language—ask if they are comfortable to communicate with you in public or if they would prefer to go somewhere more private.
- Not all people with a hearing loss want to spend time with other deaf people—respect their choices and inform them of all options available.
- Be aware that some physical displays by Deaf people may appear aggressive but are, in fact, culturally appropriate, for example a person who is Deaf may bang on the table to gain attention rather than as an overt act of aggression, or may sign more expressively and use more space than usual if they are distressed.

Communicating with people who are Deaf

Below are some key points to keep in mind when working or communicating with people who are Deaf.

Before starting to communicate

- Ask the Deaf person if they would like an interpreter present to assist communication—respect the Deaf person’s wish to use an interpreter, even if they can communicate reasonably with you by speech.
- Be sure you have allowed enough time for the conversation and breaks if they are required.
- Reduce background noise and visual distractions.
- Ensure that there is adequate light on the face of anyone who is going to be talking.
- Let the Deaf person know the subject of the conversation beforehand, if possible.

At the beginning of any communication

- Approach them personally, do not call out their name to get their attention.
- Face the person and make sure you have their attention before you speak.
- Ask them how they prefer to communicate, for example sign language, finger spelling, speech reading, in writing.
- Assess their ability to concentrate.
- Ensure the seating, lighting and other environmental factors are suitable for the person.
- Establish an environment where it is okay to ask questions.

While communicating

- Face and talk to the person directly—sit at the same level and maintain eye contact with them.
- Speak clearly at a normal rate and volume, and take turns speaking in group situations.
- Keep your hands and any objects away from and out of your mouth.
- Allow the person enough time to process what you have said and the opportunity to respond.
- Regularly check for understanding and use open ended questions.
- Avoid abrupt topic changes and explain when you are changing the topic.
- Use plenty of gestures, visual cues, facial expressions and body language to support what you’re saying
- Do not speak to the deaf person if their attention is on something else, for example if they are reading something, wait for them to finish before going on
- Write down key messages or unfamiliar words and phrases in grammatically simple sentences if necessary.
- Make use of visual aids where possible, such as pictures or diagrams.
- When a misunderstanding occurs, try to find a different way of saying the same thing rather than repeating it.
- Allow for regular breaks.
Things to avoid when communicating

When communicating with a deaf person, try to avoid:

• shouting
• being patronising
• using exaggerated mime and mouth movements
• presuming to know what is best for the deaf person
• using clichés or slang
• breaking eye contact while communicating.

NOTE: It is culturally appropriate to touch a deaf person’s arm or shoulder, or use visual cues to gain their attention, for example tapping your fingers on the table or flicking lights on and off.

Communicating with people who are hard of hearing

Below are some key points to keep in mind when working or communicating with people who are hard of hearing.

Before starting to communicate

• Be sure you have allowed enough time and have created a suitable environment.
• Reduce background noise (hearing aids amplify everything) and visual distractions where possible.
• Ensure adequate light is on the face of anyone who is going to be talking, not behind them—lighting behind the speaker will make it harder for the person to gain visual cues from lip reading.
• Wear neutral clothing if possible as vividly patterned or ‘loud’ coloured clothes could create visual interference for the person.

At the beginning of any communication

• Check to see if they would like an interpreter present to aid communication.
• Spend time with the person assessing their preferred method/s of communication and their ability to concentrate—this will help you negotiate how long a conversation will go for, and the most comfortable and effective way to communicate.
• Face the person and make sure you have their attention before you speak.
• Ensure the seating, lighting and other environmental factors are suitable for the person.
• Establish an environment where it is acceptable to ask questions.

While communicating

• Look at the person while you are talking—try to maintain the same eye level.
• Make sure your mouth is visible and keep objects or food away from your mouth—this will help make lip reading much easier.
• Speak clearly at a normal rate and volume.
• Avoid using exaggerated mouth movements or shouting.
• Use short and grammatically simple sentences.
• Give instructions one at a time.
• Allow the person enough time to process what you have said and the opportunity to respond.
• Avoid abrupt topic changes and explain when you are changing the topic.
• Use gestures, visual cues, facial expressions and body language to support what you have said.
• Write down key messages in grammatically simple sentences if necessary
• Write down unfamiliar words and phrases or look at diagrams—this may aid communication.
• Be sure any written information is large enough to read if the person also has a vision impairment.
• Rephrase misunderstood questions or comments, rather than repeating them.
• Use open ended questions to make sure information has been received and understood—smiling and nodding does not mean what you have said has been understood.
• Avoid using slang and clichés.

For more information

For more information about working with people who are deaf or hard of hearing, visit www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/mentalhealth/damh.asp.

Some information has been adapted from: