

# Communicating with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Consumers

Good communication is the first step to a positive working relationship with your consumer. The following tips will improve your communication with your consumer by allowing him/her to effectively use visual cues and what hearing he/she does have to receive as much information as possible. All of these tips are easy to follow but may require a conscious effort at first.

- **Choose a quiet environment.** Avoid communicating where there is a lot of noise or visual activity. If there is a TV or radio in the room, ask the consumer if you can turn it off or mute it for the conversation.
- **Avoid standing in front of a light source when speaking.** Bright light behind you (from a window or desk lamp) will make it harder to see your face. Make sure the light is shining on your face, not behind you.
- **In groups, make sure only one person at a time is talking.** Whoever speaks should be sure to have the attention of the person with hearing loss. Remember that a hard of hearing consumer might not be able to understand casual conversation taking place in the room.
- **Make sure you have the consumer's attention before speaking.** Waving a hand or a light touch on the shoulder or arm are acceptable ways to get attention. You can ask your consumer how he/she prefers to be alerted.
- **Look directly at the consumer and maintain eye contact.** Avoid filling out forms or reading while talking.
- **Allow the consumer to see your mouth when you are speaking.** Beware of covering your mouth with a hand or having a long mustache or beard.
- **Avoid eating or chewing gum when you are speaking.** This can interfere with lip reading.
- **Ask the consumer what will make communication easier.** This may be accomplished by writing a note to ask him/her if there are changes you can make in your communication style or if a communication aid would be helpful.

- **When writing back and forth, keep your word choices simple and sentences short.** When communicating by writing notes, keep in mind that some individuals may lack good English reading and writing skills. If the person understands you well and uses more complex sentences and vocabulary, you may do the same. Take your cue from the consumer.
- **State the topic of discussion as you begin.** When you change the topic, make sure the consumer is aware of the new topic.
- **Speak clearly, at a normal pace.** If you tend to speak quickly, slow down. Use a normal speaking voice and pace at first. If the consumer has difficulty understanding, slow your speech more, break the sentences into smaller portions, and check for understanding again.
- **Repeat the statement, then re-phrase if the consumer is unable to hear the words spoken.** This might include using shorter, simpler sentences if necessary.
- **Avoid shouting.** A loud voice may increase distortion or give the impression you are angry, without improving comprehension. If a person is deaf, your voice will not be heard clearly no matter how loud it is.
- **Use gestures, facial expression and body language to assist with communication.**
- **Be patient and take time to communicate.** Saying phrases like “never mind” or “it’s not important” can cause a person with hearing loss to feel they are not important. Remember that hearing loss does not mean a loss of intelligence.
- **Be aware of fatigue.** People who are hard of hearing must work harder to communicate and this can be extremely tiring.
- **When using an interpreter, speak directly to the consumer.** When the interpreter voices what a deaf person signs, look at the deaf person, not the interpreter.
- **For a late deafened person, a computer and word processor can be a useful communication tool.** Enlarge the font so it is easy to read. Let the consumer speak, and if they do not understand your speech, type and allow the consumer to read the computer screen

- **Do not be afraid to make mistakes.** Most deaf or hard of hearing people are very comfortable communicating with hearing people. Most will appreciate any attempt to communicate, even if the process seems difficult to you.