

Deaf Culture

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It often comes as a surprise to people that many deaf people refer to themselves as being members of Deaf culture. The **American Deaf culture** is a unique linguistic minority that uses American Sign Language (ASL) as its primary mode of communication. This tipsheet provides a description of Deaf culture and suggestions for effective communication.

Common terms used within the Deaf community:

The American Deaf culture has labels for identifying its members. These labels reflect both cultural values and beliefs.

Deaf - This term refers to members of the Deaf community who share common values, norms, traditions, language, and behaviors. Deaf people do not perceive themselves as having lost something (i.e., hearing) and do not think of themselves as handicapped, impaired, or disabled. They celebrate and cherish their culture because it gives them the unique privilege of sharing a common history and language. Deaf people are considered a linguistic minority within the American culture. They have their own culture and at the same time live and work within the dominant American culture.

Deaf, hard of hearing, and deafened - Within the Deaf culture these words refer to a person's audiological status. Notice lower case "d" is used. People who describe themselves as "hard of hearing" or "deafened" do not see themselves as members of the Deaf culture. Some may know sign language but their primary language is English.

Hearing Impaired - This term often is used by the media and society in general to refer to people with a hearing loss. A more acceptable generic phrase is "deaf and hard of hearing" to refer to **all** people with a hearing loss. Within the Deaf culture, the term "hearing impaired" often is seen as offensive. It suggests that Deaf people are "broken" or "inferior" because they do not hear.

Hearing - Within the Deaf culture the term "hearing" is used to identify people who are members of the dominant American culture. One might think the ASL sign for "hearing" is related to the group's ability to hear (e.g., pointing to the ear). However, the sign for "hearing" is related to the ability to "talk." The act of talking is clearly visible to Deaf people, whereas listening or hearing is not. From the Deaf culture perspective, it is the act of "talking" that clearly separates the two groups.

Comparison of Values:

The most dominant cultural pattern in the United States is **individualism**. Most Americans have been raised to consider themselves as separate individuals who are exclusively responsible for their own lives. Common phrases that reflect this cultural pattern are "Do your own thing," "Look out for number one," and "I did it my way." For example, when Americans introduce themselves, they feel it is important to include their name and occupation, which serve to emphasize their uniqueness. Closely associated with individualism is the importance Americans place on privacy. Americans have "personal space" and "personal thoughts." They find it odd if a person does not value "being alone."

In contrast, one of the most dominant cultural patterns in the Deaf culture is **collectivism**. Deaf people consider themselves members of a group that includes **all** Deaf people. They perceive themselves as a close-knit and interconnected group. Deaf people greatly enjoy being in the company of other Deaf people and actively seek ways to do this. When Deaf people first meet, the initial goal is to find out where the other person is from and to identify the Deaf friends they both have in common.

A person's physical appearance is noted and remembered because it is the landscape for all signed communication. Sometimes a person's name may not come up until the end of the conversation. Closely associated with collectivism is the importance of open communication. Having secrets or withholding information work against an interconnected collective.

The behaviors associated with cultural values are deeply rooted. We do not consciously think about the rules involved when making introductions or how to say goodbye when we leave. As children we saw these behaviors repeated often and have long since fully incorporated them into our cultural repertoire. It is only when we are placed in a culture that uses different rules that we realize there is another possible way to accomplish the same task. For example, when a Deaf person leaves a gathering of other Deaf people, the process is quite lengthy. In Deaf culture one approaches each group to say goodbye, which often results in further conversation. The entire process may take more than an hour to accomplish. This behavior may seem unusual; however, if we remember that Deaf culture highly values being interconnected with all of its members, the behavior makes a great deal of sense.

American Sign Language:

Another important cultural value for Deaf people is their language - ASL. Most Deaf people spend the majority of their lives with people who do not know ASL. It is only when Deaf people are in the presence of other Deaf people that all communication barriers are removed.

It is obvious to most people that ASL is a visual language. What is not so obvious is how the visual nature of the language impacts on the rules for communication. In spoken languages there is no requirement for eye contact between the speaker and listener. In fact, we spend very little time looking at each other. We are not used to maintaining eye contact for long periods of time. Also, we often allow environmental noises to take our attention and we divert our eyes. In a signed conversation the "listener" must always look at the "speaker." From the Deaf perspective, broken eye contact or the lack of eye contact shows indifference.

Most hearing people do not freely and effectively use their face and body to communicate, so Deaf people see their communication as lifeless and lacking emotion.

Facial expression and body language are integral parts of ASL. Deaf people have an exceptional ability to use and read nonverbal communication. They pick up on very subtle facial and body movements. An important aspect of body language is the use of "touch." Touching another person is used in Deaf culture to greet, say goodbye, get attention, and express emotion.

Guidelines for Communication:

1) Most people feel uncomfortable when meeting a Deaf person for the first time. This is very normal. When we communicate with people, we generally don't have to think about the process. When faced with a Deaf person, we are uncertain which rules apply. We don't know where to look, or how fast or loud to speak. When the Deaf person gives us a look of confusion, we don't know how to correct the problem. Accept the fact that your initial communications will feel uncomfortable and awkward. As you interact more, you will start to feel more comfortable and know how to make yourself understood.

- 2) It's okay to write to a Deaf person. The Deaf person will appreciate your effort even more if you use a combination of gestures, facial expressions, body language, and written communication. Some Deaf people can lip read very well. If one approach doesn't work, try another. If the Deaf person uses her/his voice and you don't understand, it's fine to indicate the person should write.
- 3) Most people engage in very quick and efficient conversations. We often lose patience when someone is having difficulty understanding. We look for ways to speed up the interaction. Deaf people highly value face-to-face communication and perceive it as an investment, not an imposition. Take the time to communicate and connect. If the Deaf person does not understand, she or he will ask questions. If you do not understand the Deaf person, stop the conversation and ask for clarification. Never fake understanding or say, "Never mind, it's not important." No matter how trivial, share the information.
- 4) Deaf people listen with their eyes. A Deaf person cannot look at an object and at the same time listen to you describe how to use it. Only talk when you have eye contact with the Deaf person.
- 5) Many Deaf people will use a sign language interpreter. You should speak directly to the Deaf person, not to the interpreter, and maintain eye contact with the Deaf person. This will feel awkward because the Deaf person will be looking at the interpreter, not you, but it will be noticed and appreciated by the Deaf person.
- 6) Some people are reluctant to attempt to communicate directly with a Deaf person when they use an interpreter. Use the beginning and end of the conversation as an opportunity for direct communication with the Deaf person. When you take the initiative to shake hands, make eye contact, use gestures, touch and/or smile, you are communicating in a visual and tactile manner.

Please note these guidelines aren't meant to be an inclusive list in working with culturally Deaf people, but a starting point for improved conditions.

For more information, contact:

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