



HANDS IN MOTION

Professional Sign Language Interpreters

People who share a culture share language, customs, history, and values and pass on those attributes to their children. The reality of being Deaf * encompasses a whole set of shared experiences with a common language: American Sign Language.

American Sign Language (ASL) is a complex visual-spatial language used by people who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Hearing within the Deaf community. ASL is the preferred language in the United States and English-speaking parts of Canada. It is a natural language, linguistically complete, and can be used to discuss, comment or create the most intricate of conversational demands, whether it be of historical merit, legal argument, poetry, or philosophy. In short, anything that can be spoken can be visually imparted.

ASL is not "English-on-the-hands. It does not contain grammatical similarities to English and is not broken English, mime, or a gestural form of English. While ASL and other sign languages contain "gestural" components, there are also facial "signals" on the forehead, cheek, and mouth areas that complete the grammatical syntax of the language. Further, ASL is a three-dimensional (3-D) language as the space surrounding the signer is incorporated to describe places and persons not present. It is a subtle language. It is a vibrant language.

Like all languages, ASL has a specific set of building blocks. These "parameters" include the handshapes, palm orientation of the hands, their movement and placement. The combination of these four parameters plus the non-manual aspects of facial expression, body position create American Sign Language.

Fingerspelling is an important aspect of ASL. Used for emphasis, clarification (favorite brand of _____, a person's name, a specific place) it has strong linguistic qualities.

ASL is not universal. Each country has its own language: French Sign Language, British Sign Language Russian Sign Language, etc. While vocabulary, signs in general, and structures of each sign language is unique, Deaf people are adept at understanding one another where their Hearing counterparts struggle with dictionaries and primitive pronunciations. It is the ability to truly see the "whole picture," using space, describing without censorship that allows this to transpire.

Deaf people are proud of their language and heritage. However, you may meet some deaf people who do not consider themselves culturally Deaf. They have grown up with the mainstream culture of their Hearing families and have not shared the customs, language, school experiences of their Deaf peers. There are also people who can not hear, use their own voices and may or may not sign. They are Oralists...adept lip readers. Ultimately, there is not one "neat" definition to describe a person who is deaf/Deaf.

Hearing culture and Deaf culture are different. As professionals, neighbors, and friends we must learn to appreciate the individual and cultural differences found in our City. Diversity is the cornerstone to making a community work. Open minds and open hearts allow us to truly see and appreciate one another.

* The term Deaf with a capital "D" represents a community and cultural group that share a common language and set of values. Many Hard of Hearing people as well as Hearing individuals are members in this Community because there is a shared language, respect, and cultural understanding.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing people you encounter may or may not use their voices. Using one's voice is a personal choice and we, as Hearing people must not assume that Deaf people can not talk or should talk. Again, this is a personal choice made by the individual and is to be respected. Therefore, you will probably experience communication through a Sign Language Interpreter.

The Interpreter is the conduit, your link to understanding each other. The Deaf or Hard of Hearing person will watch the Interpreter while you are speaking, glancing at you. As the Deaf person signs, they will shift their eye gaze between you and the Interpreter. Please do not insist that the Deaf person look at you to lip read. Lip reading is a difficult skill to master as many letters and words look the same on the mouth (M & N; B & P; V & F; "olive juice" & "I love you").

The interpreter is a professional who has studied many years language, culture, and the interpreting process. She/he is there to translate between people who do not use the same language. Anytime you hear the Interpreter's voice, you are hearing the ideas, opinions, questions and discourse of the Deaf and/or Hard of Hearing person(s), not the Interpreter's. When you respond, speak directly to the Deaf or Hard of Hearing individual using the first person ("Do you believe..."). Do not address the Interpreter "Ask him if he believes...." Whatever you say, the Interpreter will sign. Whatever the Deaf individual signs, the Interpreter will voice.

As a professional, the Interpreter adheres to a Code of Professional Conduct established by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (R.I.D.) and or the National Association of the Deaf (N.A.D.). In part, the Code of Professional Conduct mandates that:

- Interpreters shall not counsel, advise, or interject person opinions.
- Interpreters shall render the message faithfully, always conveying the content and the spirit of the speaker, using language most readily understood by the person(s) whom they serve.
- Interpreters shall keep all assignment-related information strictly confidential.

NAD/RID test and certify working Interpreters in the field.

The following outline will facilitate communication...

- The person signing for the Deaf or Hard of Hearing (HoH) person is called an Interpreter. She/he will introduce herself/himself to you prior to the meeting/session/event. You may have a "team" interpreting situation especially for events whereas for a therapeutic session, intake of any kind, one interpreter will suffice. Due to the nature of our profession, it is not only a complex thought process of changing one language into a second language form, but it is physically challenging. The team approach promotes accuracy of the translation/interpretation process.
- The Interpreter tends to sit or stand next to the Hearing speaker with the Deaf/HoH person seated in a location that lends itself to the best advantage to see the speaker(s) and Interpreter.
- The Interpreter and Deaf/HoH individual may have moments of clarification and not include you. Interpreting from language to language requires more time than direct communication between yourself and the Deaf/HoH individual. The Interpreter may vocally (and signing at the same time) request a point of clarification from you. However, it is not permissible for the Interpreter and Deaf/HoH individual to have a private conversation as it is not possible for you to ask the Interpreter, "Please don't sign this, but..."

To reiterate, the Interpreter is a professional conduit for communication.

As is true with all minority groups, Deaf people suffer from stereotyping by those who do not know or understand. A number of myths about Deaf people circulates widely in our society and blocks understanding between Hearing and Deaf individuals.

MYTH: *All hearing losses are the same*

FACT: The single term “deafness” covers a wide range of hearing losses that have very different effects on a person’s ability to process sound and, thus, to understand speech.

MYTH: *All Deaf people are mute.*

FACT: Some Deaf people speak very well and clearly; others do not because their hearing loss prevented them from learning spoken language. Deafness usually has little effect on the vocal chords and very few Deaf people are truly mute.

MYTH: *People with a hearing loss are “Deaf and Dumb.”*

FACT: The inability to hear affects neither native intelligence nor the physical ability to produce sounds. Deafness does not make people “dumb” in the sense of being either stupid or mute. Deaf people understandably find this stereotype particularly offensive.

MYTH: *All Deaf people use hearing aids*

FACT: Many Deaf people benefit considerably from hearing aids. Many do not benefit or consider hearing aids annoying thus choosing not to use them.

MYTH: *Hearing aids restore hearing.*

FACT: Hearing aids amplify sound. They have no effect on a person’s ability to process that sound. In cases where a hearing loss distorts incoming sounds, a hearing aid can do nothing to correct this and may make the distortion worse

MYTH: *Cochlear implants are then the answer to hearing aids.*

FACT: Cochlear implants hold no guarantee that the surgery will result in the ability to hear as someone who has a “normal” hearing range. This is major surgery. It requires lengthy rehabilitation and the recipient has to “learn to hear.” The result may be only the ability to distinguish loud noises and not conversation. It may result in being able to hear in a quiet environment. It is an individual decision and is **not a cure** for deafness. Implants are a controversial issue in the Deaf Community.

MYTH: *All Deaf people can read lips.*

FACT: Some Deaf people are very skilled lip readers, but many are not. This is because speech sounds have identical mouth movements. It is rude to ask a Deaf person if she/he can read lips. Pick up a pen and paper, use gesture, use a near-by computer and type back and forth. Be creative and relaxed.

MYTH: *All Deaf people use sign language.*

FACT: Many Deaf people, especially pre-lingual Deaf people, use sign language. Many others do not.

MYTH: *Deaf people are less intelligent.*

FACT: Hearing ability is unrelated to intelligence. The general public’s lack of knowledge about deafness, however, has often limited educational and occupational opportunities for Deaf individuals.

MYTH: *Deaf people are alike in abilities, taste, etc.*

FACT: Deaf people are as diverse in their abilities, tastes, ideas, habits, and outlooks as any other large group of people.

A hearing loss impedes, sometimes drastically, a person's ability to receive information through sound. Therefore, Deaf people depend very heavily on their eyes to understand what others are saying to them. These simple, sensible steps will facilitate communication.

SOME DO'S AND DON'T'S

Do be aware that even a small hearing loss can hamper a person's ability to understand what you say. Don't assume that a hearing aid corrects hearing loss.

Do get the Deaf person's attention before you begin to speak, and Don't start speaking without it. It is perfectly acceptable to tap a person lightly on the shoulder or arm or to wave your hand in the person's direction to attract her attention.

Do face the Deaf person and maintain eye contact throughout the conversation. Don't talk directly to the interpreter; always address the Deaf person.

Do stand close to the Deaf person. Don't let any object obstruct the person's view of you.

Do make sure the Deaf person can see your mouth while you are talking. Don't converse while eating, smoking, or chewing gum. Be conscious of keeping your hands away from your mouth which would block important information.

Do stand in a well-lighted place. Don't stand with your back to a light source (lamp, window) as this creates shadows on your face making it difficult for the Deaf person to see you clearly.

Do try to converse in a quiet location. Don't assume that background noise will not interfere in your interaction.

Do speak and enunciate clearly and normally. Don't exaggerate your lip movements.

Do use your voice, but don't shout. Many Deaf people can hear some information through sound, but shouting distorts both the sound of the words and the lip movements.

Do use facial expression and body language to augment your message. Don't be embarrassed to be expressive.

Do be sensitive to whether the Deaf person is understanding or just being polite, nodding in agreement without following what you are saying. Don't assume that a bland expression implies she is understanding what you are saying.

Do rephrase a sentence by adding a clarifying word, or use a synonym if you are not understood. Don't repeat the same phrase or words over and over in the same sequence.

Do use pencil and paper, or visual aids (pointing, computer if available, your handheld technology). Don't feel it is a "failure to communicate" if you must resort to writing things down.

Do equip your facility with TTY's—Telecommunication Devices for the Deaf, captioning abilities on televisions, alarm flashers and other visual communication devices useful to Deaf and hard of Hearing individuals. Don't deny Deaf and Hard of Hearing people vital information as accessed through these devices.

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