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HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH HEARING LOSS

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by

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RESEARCH

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:	4
THE ART OF PRESENTATION	5
LIP READING	6
GOING BY THE BOOK	7
TEXTING	8
BASIC ASL SIGNS	9
FINGERSPELLING	10
SIGNING WITH YOUR FACE	11
BRING ALONG AN INTERPRETER	12
SUMMARY	13
CITATIONS	16
RESOURCES:	16

INTRODUCTION:

As we lose our hearing, the world becomes a smaller place. Sounds that used to annoy and distract us become fainter and fainter to the point it seems the world is losing its ability to communicate with us. More and more, we find ourselves in quiet isolation.

Still, the world is out there. When you lose your hearing, you become intimidated of having conversations. You can't quite grasp what they're saying. Before you can ask anything, you've missed the next part. Suddenly, you're at sea and don't understand a word. Sometimes when you ask, again and again, people think you're simple-minded or get frustrated at you. It's so deflating and discouraging, that many who suffer with hearing loss end up distancing themselves from others.

The first step in preventing isolation is to decide not to be embarrassed, shy, or reluctant to engage others. **There are many ways** to crash through the hearing loss barrier and establish communication, which is what this book is about. We're going to discuss eight different ways we can communicate with others regardless of the extent of our hearing loss.

To set the stage, we should reflect on the experience of Clay, a hard of hearing fellow who took a European river cruise with his wife, Valerie, several years ago. At one point they ended up on different water shuttles. As Valerie watched, Clay and a stranger on the other shuttle stood staring at one another, motioning with their hands. Back on the ship, she asked her husband what had happened.

"Oh, I was just talking to that man about his family and telling him about mine. It was very interesting."

Astonished, Valerie said, "But you don't speak German. And you can't hear anyway."

Clay shrugged. "Didn't matter. We understood one another quite well."

The essence of communication is the desire to understand and to be understood.



THE ART OF PRESENTATION

The first enhanced communication method we'll discuss is simply presentation: the way we present ourselves and attempt to express ourselves. We have a two-fold purpose here: **to make ourselves understood** and **to set an example for the people with whom we are trying to speak**.

The Audiology Clinic of the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) has posted a wonderful list of recommendations about this, although they come at it from the opposite side: "Communicating with People with Hearing Loss," rather than, "Teaching People Who Don't Have a Hearing Loss How to Communicate with You." Some of their ideas have real merit:



- **Stand or sit at the same level** so that you are looking into the eyes of the other person.



- **Speak slowly and distinctly**, without exaggerating any words



- **Discourage the other person from shouting**. Shouting distorts language and makes it hard to read lips.



- **Avoid long sentences or long speeches**. Keep sentences simple and keep the dialogue interactive, which contributes to both individuals' understanding.



- **Don't do anything to conceal your face** while you speak and let the other person know gently if they are doing something that makes it difficult for you.



- **Point out any background noise** or other distractions that may force you to pause.



- If your hearing is better in one ear than another, **tap the better ear** when you want something that was said to be repeated.



- **Try an “active listening” technique:** if you aren’t sure what the other person is saying, repeat back what you think they mean using other words.

Remember that each encounter with another person is an opportunity to learn and a challenge for both of you. If you weren’t able to fully communicate, perhaps you can be grateful for the effort and for the lesson in what didn’t work.





LIP READING

Some individuals who have suffered progressive hearing loss have compared learning to read lips to learning another language. To see how difficult lip reading may be—and to practice, turn the TV volume all the way down instead of all the way up. Watching weather broadcasts may be the most helpful initial training because, unlike news anchors, the weather forecaster remains on the screen throughout the allotted time. Since you know the subject and you know the familiar weather words, you may find yourself able to follow along. Next, it's time to move on to the news reporters, who will always face the camera and enunciate. With a little practice, you not only learn to read what is being said, but the different nuances of each reporter's facial movements.

Here are some insightful tips into lipreading that will demystify the process and encourage you:¹

- Rely not just on trying to understand words, but also on the context and clues about what the speaker is saying. **Only 30-40% of English words are recognizable by facial movement.** You're going to be filling in the blanks.
- **Don't try to understand every word.** Instead, try to grasp sentences. For lip readers, longer sentences are easier to get than shorter ones.
- **Watch closely for facial cues.** They help you understand the context.
- What is the speaker's body language telling you? **Practice watching the conversation of people in the distance.** What does their posture say?
- **Don't hesitate to tell people** you're reading their lips and to ask them to slow down.
- **Practice reading your own** lips in the mirror.



GOING BY THE BOOK

Another method of communicating with others, if you have difficulty hearing what they are saying is **to write things down**. The beauty and the possibilities of this kind of communication were demonstrated cleverly in the 1963 motion picture *Lilies of the Field*. The main character, portrayed by Sidney Poitier, was a construction worker who spoke only English. He tried futilely to communicate with a nun who spoke only German. Finally, it occurred to them that, since each was familiar with the Bible, they could express themselves by calling out the chapter and verse of the different books—one reading in English and the other in German.

There are several methods, low-tech and high-tech, to accomplish this, depending on the medium on which you feel most comfortable writing, and which you feel most comfortable carrying. You can carry a small sketch pad, 5" x 4" or so. The pages are completely blank and the cardboard backing is substantial enough that you don't have to rest the book on a flat surface to write. If you prefer a lined page, consider either a composition book, the type that is used by students, or a "trade size" spiral notebook. These are typically about 300 pages with a functional writing space of 5.5" x 8.5". Like an artist's tablet, it can be written on without setting it on a hard surface. At the high-tech end, you can use a large cellphone or a small tablet computer. There are many apps on these devices that will let you either type out what you want or swipe your fingers across the keyboard to write words.

To show the other person your intentions, after you engage the other, write something on your notebook or tablet: **"I have trouble hearing. Would you mind writing your response on this? Thanks!"**

TEXTING

The majority of the civilized world now has “**unlimited talk and text**” on their cell phones. Texting has become a universal form of communication. Adolescents sitting in the same room have been known to text one another rather than speaking, especially if adults are present.

Texting, sending IMs (instant messages) typed information from one cell phone to another, is a technology that is less than 30-years-old but one that has swept the world. Every minute of every day, **more than 15 million text messages are sent**. In one day, Americans will send 6 billion text messages. As overwhelming and absurd as this reality is, it is a viable way for you to overcome your hearing issues and communicate with 97% of the people you encounter—because that’s the percentage of Americans with text-enabled cell phones.

One way to proceed is to have some **business cards** made up to hand to the person with whom you want to interact. The message should be simple and easily comprehensible: “**Hi! My name is Joan. I’m a little hard of hearing, but I’m good at texting. Would you text me at this number, (xxx) xxx-xxxx, so I can text you back and ask you a question?**”

Of course, you have to be circumspect in who you approach in this way. However, such interactions can become wryly funny. Text messages force a certain etiquette upon us as users: each person writes a brief message, then pauses to await an answer. Texting has forced Americans not only to respect brief, concise communication but also where all the letters are on a **QWERTY** keyboard.

Your last message to the person you’ve been texting with should be: “Watch now and you’ll see me delete your number.” This protection of the other’s privacy is an expression of gratitude for the shared trust.



BASIC ASL SIGNS

Learning **American Sign Language (ASL)** is an interesting consideration for those who believe that their hearing loss is going to be progressive. Several remarkable things happen when you begin acquainting yourself with ASL. First, you learn that **ASL is an actual language**, not merely some sort of charades-like pantomime of English. As with any new language you learn, there is emotional power and drama in the way words are put together to enhance meaning. ASL is also quaint and historic in many of its word signs, reflective of the early 19th-century epoch during which it was created.²

Second, acquiring the rudimentary signs entails wanting others with whom to practice. Thus, this form of communicating is something you'll want to reserve for your family and closest friends. When using ASL, as many professional interpreters for the deaf do when instructing, it's best to sign and voice what you are signing at the same time. This makes it easier for others to pick up the language along with you. The most important folks you want to share this new language with are **grandchildren**—if you have any. They learn quickly and will end up being the very ones with whom you most want to communicate.

Third, ironically, as the hearing world recedes from you, the ASL world begins to open up. For those unacquainted with deaf culture, the extent of that nuanced world can be an amazing, enlightening, enriching addition. Deaf friends can share an entirely new outlook on life.





FINGERSPELLING

FINGERSPELLING

If proficiency in ASL is something that takes months and years to acquire, **the fingerspelling** alphabet is something that **can be learned in an afternoon**. With practice, one can become proficient at it in a few weeks.

Fingerspelling is just that, **26 signs—one for each letter of the alphabet**. Words are spelled out in English. Often, when deaf people are signing with ASL, they will stop in the middle of a sentence to spell out a word. Perhaps there is yet no sign for that word—after all, new words are coming into use minute by minute—or it may be a name for which there is no sign. In the deaf community, names are turned into signs, so that each individual introduces himself or herself by name—usually through fingerspelling—and then shows the sign that becomes their name. It's said that, **in ASL, about 8 or 9 percent of the communication is actually fingerspelling**.³

Like ASL, fingerspelling will be reserved for those you will interact with regularly. If text messages are short, fingerspelled messages are even shorter. People who communicate via ASL are usually so fast when they fingerspell that non-ASL people have to watch and then slowly spell out the letters they just saw to figure out what was said.

One great virtue of fingerspelling is that you can ask questions and make statements from all the way across the room without disturbing anyone. You can converse in movie theaters, elevators, and worship services without making a sound.

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE FINGERSPELLING

A



B



C



D



E



F



G



H



I



J



K



L



M



N



O



P



Q



R



S



T



U



V



W



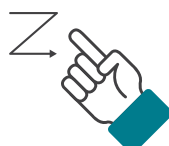
X



Y



Z



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



0





SIGNING WITH YOUR FACE

SIGNING WITH YOUR FACE

If you have ever watched a truly good interpreter for the deaf, you'll see that person's face is full of expression and emotion. **Interpreters are taught to convey the emotional weight** of what they are interpreting with their facial expressions.

Bringing that idea back into the fold of how you as a hard of hearing individual can communicate with others who can hear, you could say that you want to sign with your face. **As you speak to a hearing person, you want your face and your body language to accentuate the words you speak.**

Those who hear perfectly are actually doing the same thing with sound that you will be doing with visual cues. This is called **"prosody,"** meaning emphasizing what is being said with your face and body. All of us who hear and speak normally do the same thing: **we emphasize our words with intonation, rhythm, stressing certain parts of speech.**⁴

You're not **"signing with your face"** in hopes of getting the person you're speaking with to do the same, but rather to make yourself fully, clearly understood. This is done in hopes that the recipient of your signing will become emotionally engaged and therefore committed to sharing with the same clarity. Whether that happens or not, you will at least have the benefit of watching the other person's face as you speak expressively. **You'll be able to tell by the facial clues** you receive back whether or not the other person is grasping what you are saying and what emotional reaction your signing with your face is having with this individual.

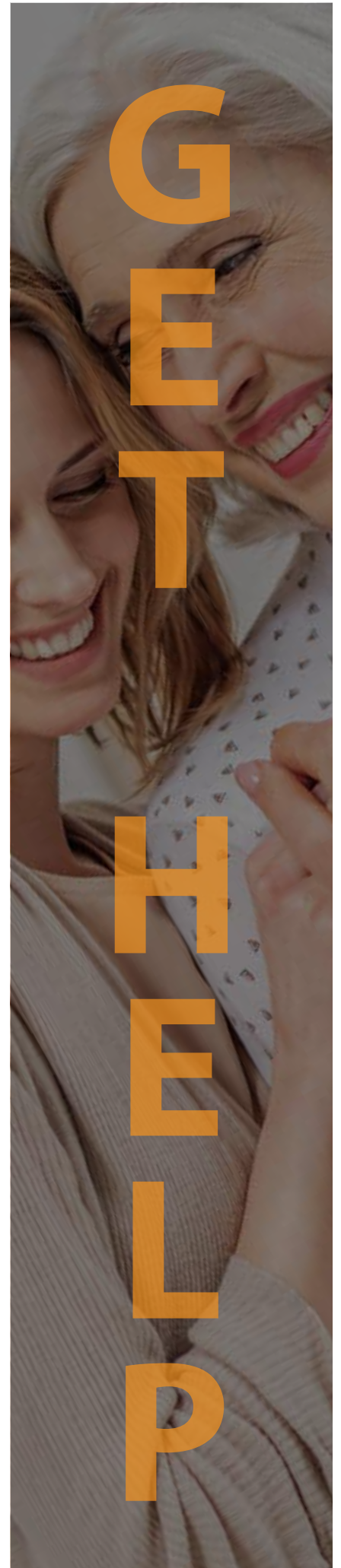
BRING ALONG AN INTERPRETER

One of the handouts of the Americans with Disabilities Act is a flyer entitled “Communicating with People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in Hospital Settings.” To one side of that flyer is a list of the various types of interpreters a deaf person can bring along when going to the hospital: **ASL interpreters, oral interpreters, cued speech interpreters, and a computer-assisted interpreter.**

As you go out into the world seeking to interact with individuals, you might consider taking along an interpreter of your own—not somebody you necessarily pay to do the work for you, but rather a friend or spouse or individual with whom you have really good communication ability. Even in the face of progressive hearing loss, almost all of us have someone who **“gets us,”** who knows us well enough to know what it is we are asking and is a good enough translator to express to us what others are telling us.

While the intent of having an **interpreter is theoretically to help you understand what another person is saying to you,** the impact goes far beyond mere translation and interpretation. In historical settings, an “interpreter” is someone who strives to bridge the span of generations and centuries to help the tourist understand why certain events happened as they did: what were people’s motives, what worked, what failed, and what changed as a result.

When you have someone go with you into the world, whether it’s the hair salon, the sporting goods store, the doctor’s office, or the post office, your interpreter will not only express the essence of what has been said but will also serve as a bridge and a conductor, helping you understand the person and the situation you’re dealing with to the **fullest possible extent.** It’s sort of ironic that the hearing loss which so seems to isolate you has in fact opened up new worlds for you.



SUMMARY

There are a surprising number of ways that a hard of hearing individual can choose to communicate clearly and effectively with the hearing world. In these few pages, we have reviewed many potential forms of communication. Some of these possibilities may seem simple and practical—like carrying a notebook so the person you’re trying to interact with can write down precisely what she or he wants to tell you. Other possibilities seem challenging, time-consuming, and quite involved—like learning ASL.

Regardless of what communication methods you might choose to employ, the fact that **there are so many possibilities** and that they all have real potential is a clear sign that you need not pull back from the world and surrender to the creeping isolation of hearing loss. Communication challenges certainly seem daunting, but each one **opens new doors, new possibilities** for learning and growth.

Hearing loss may appear to be slowly drawing a circle of isolation around us. That may be the outcome if we allow it. Or it may be the case that rising to the new challenges we face may open new doors of possibility as well. One is reminded that one of the most creative, innovative people who ever lived suffered from hearing problems beginning when he was a child. The progressive hearing loss Thomas Edison faced always haunted him. In his personal phonograph—which he invented—there were toothmarks left by Edison; biting down on the edge of the phonograph was the only way he could hear the music. Beyond this, however, he was known for taking on new challenges fearlessly and devising astonishing solutions.

Thomas Edison was also known for his wit and quickness. He never let the world make him too serious. As he once quipped with a smile, **“Everybody knows I’m hard of hearing, but nobody knows how hard of hearing I am.”** Edison always found a way to communicate well with everyone around him.



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RESOURCES:

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- <https://www.ada.gov/hospcombrprt.pdf>
- <https://www.wikihow.com/Read-Lips>
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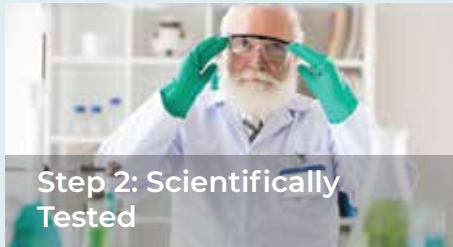


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