

Community and Culture – Frequently Asked Questions

Question — What is the difference between a person who is “deaf,” “Deaf,” or “hard of hearing”?

The deaf and hard of hearing community is diverse. There are variations in how a person becomes deaf or hard of hearing, level of hearing, age of onset, educational background, communication methods, and cultural identity. How people “label” or identify themselves is personal and may reflect identification with the deaf and hard of hearing community, the degree to which they can hear, or the relative age of onset. For example, some people identify themselves as “late-deafened,” indicating that they became deaf later in life. Other people identify themselves as “deaf-blind,” which usually indicates that they are deaf or hard of hearing and also have some degree of vision loss. Some people believe that the term “people with hearing loss” is inclusive and efficient. However, some people who were born deaf or hard of hearing do not think of themselves as having lost their hearing. Over the years, the most commonly accepted terms have come to be “deaf,” “Deaf,” and “hard of hearing.”

“Deaf” and “deaf”

According to Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, in *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (1988):

We use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language – American Sign Language (ASL) – and a culture. The members of this group have inherited their sign language, use it as a primary means of communication among themselves, and hold a set of beliefs about themselves and their connection to the larger society. We distinguish them from, for example, those who find themselves losing their hearing because of illness, trauma or age; although these people share the condition of not hearing, they do not have access to the knowledge, beliefs, and practices that make up the culture of Deaf people.

Padden and Humphries comment, “this knowledge of Deaf people is not simply a camaraderie with others who have a similar physical condition, but is, like many other cultures in the traditional sense of the term, historically created and actively transmitted across generations.” The authors also add that Deaf people “have found ways to define and express themselves through their rituals, tales, performances, and everyday social encounters. The richness of their sign language affords them the possibilities of insight, invention, and irony.” The relationship Deaf people have with their sign language is a strong one, and “the mistaken belief that ASL is a set of simple gestures with no internal structure has led to the tragic misconception that the relationship of Deaf people to their sign language is a casual one that can be easily severed and replaced.” (Padden & Humphries)

“Hard of Hearing”

“Hard-of-hearing” can denote a person with a mild-to-moderate hearing loss. Or it can denote a deaf person who doesn’t have/want any cultural affiliation with the Deaf community. Or both. The HOH dilemma: in some ways hearing, in some ways deaf, in others, neither.

Can one be hard-of-hearing and ASL-Deaf? That’s possible, too. Can one be hard-of-hearing and function as hearing? Of course. What about being hard-of-hearing and functioning as a member of both the hearing and Deaf communities? That’s a delicate tightrope-balancing act, but it too is possible.

As for the political dimension: HOH people can be allies of the Deaf community. They can choose to join or to ignore it. They can participate in the social, cultural, political, and legal life of the community along with culturally-Deaf or live their lives completely within the parameters of the “Hearing world.” But they may have a more difficult time establishing a satisfying cultural/social identity.

Deaf Life, “For Hearing People Only” (October 1997).

Individuals can choose an audiological or cultural perspective. It’s all about choices, comfort level, mode of communication, and acceptance. Whatever the decision, the NAD welcomes all Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and deaf-blind Americans, and the advocacy work that the NAD does is available to and intended to benefit everyone.

Question — What is wrong with the use of these terms “deaf-mute,” “deaf and dumb,” or “hearing-impaired”?

Deaf and hard of hearing people have the right to choose what they wish to be called, either as a group or on an individual basis. Overwhelmingly, deaf and hard of hearing people prefer to be called “deaf” or “hard of hearing.” Nearly all organizations of the deaf use the term “deaf and hard of hearing,” and the NAD is no exception.

Yet there are many people who persist in using terms other than “deaf” and “hard of hearing.” The alternative terms are often seen in print, heard on radio and television, and picked up in casual conversations all over. Let’s take a look at the three most-used alternative terms.

Deaf and Dumb — A relic from the medieval English era, this is the granddaddy of all negative labels pinned on deaf and hard of hearing people. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, pronounced us “deaf and dumb,” because he felt that deaf people were incapable of being taught, of learning, and of reasoned thinking. To his way of thinking, if a person could not use his/her voice in the same way as hearing people, then there was no way that this person could develop cognitive abilities. (Source: Deaf Heritage, by Jack Gannon, 1980)

In later years, “dumb” came to mean “silent.” This definition still persists, because that is how people see deaf people. The term is offensive to deaf and hard of hearing people for a number of reasons. One, deaf and hard of hearing people are by no means “silent” at all. They use sign language, lip-reading, vocalizations, and so on to communicate. Communication is not reserved for hearing people alone, and using one’s voice is not the only way to communicate. Two, “dumb” also has a second meaning: stupid. Deaf and hard of hearing people have encountered plenty of people who subscribe to the philosophy that if you cannot use your voice well, you don’t have much else “upstairs,” and have nothing going for you. Obviously, this is incorrect, ill-informed, and false. Deaf and hard of hearing people have repeatedly proved that they have much to contribute to the society at large.

Deaf-Mute – Another offensive term from the 18th-19th century, “mute” also means silent and without voice. This label is technically inaccurate, since deaf and hard of hearing people generally have functioning vocal chords. The challenge lies with the fact that to successfully modulate your voice, you generally need to be able to hear your own voice. Again, because deaf and hard of hearing people use various methods of communication other than or in addition to using their voices, they are not truly mute. True communication occurs when one’s message is understood by others, and they can respond in kind.

Hearing-impaired – This term is no longer accepted by most in the community but was at one time preferred, largely because it was viewed as politically correct. To declare oneself or another person as deaf or blind, for example, was considered somewhat bold, rude, or impolite. At that time, it was thought better to use the word “impaired” along with “visually,” “hearing,” “mobility,” and so on. “Hearing-impaired” was a well-meaning term that is not accepted or used by many deaf and hard of hearing people.

For many people, the words “deaf” and “hard of hearing” are not negative. Instead, the term “hearing-impaired” is viewed as negative. The term focuses on what people can’t do. It establishes the standard as “hearing” and anything different as “impaired,” or substandard, hindered, or damaged. It implies that something is not as it should be and ought to be fixed if possible. To be fair, this is probably not what people intended to convey by the term “hearing impaired.”

Every individual is unique, but there is one thing we all have in common: we all want to be treated with respect. To the best of our own unique abilities, we have families, friends, communities, and lives that are just as fulfilling as anyone else. We may be different, but we are not less.

What’s in a name? Plenty! Words and labels can have a profound effect on people. Show your respect for people by refusing to use outdated or offensive terms. When in doubt, ask the individual how they identify themselves.

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