

Managing Hearing Loss
During that All-Important
Counselling Session

by

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April 2013

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Understanding 'Deafness'

Life depends on communication and the thought of communicating with someone who speaks another language can feel stressful. Communicating with someone who is 'deaf' can also prove challenging to the individual who finds him- or herself on 'new ground'. Thoughts that enter the mind of an individual may include:-



I really can't do this

I'll ignore the situation – after all, it's their problem, not mine

Shouting and talking more slowly must be the way to do it

Is anyone watching me?

Yet finding yourself on new ground is probably the wrong phrase to use as, in the United Kingdom, there are over eight million people with some kind of hearing loss, this figure including around fifty thousand who use sign language as their first language. Unlike physical disabilities, which we all recognise, sensory loss remains hidden and the only evidence of hearing impairment may come in the form of hands creating communication or spotting that an individual is wearing a hearing aid. So, if you are 'confronted' with the need to overcome that fear of talking to a 'deaf' person, just what do you do?

And you, as a counsellor, who knows very well that your client's hearing loss could be contributing to the reason for the person being with you, just what are you going to do about this communication difference? The content of this booklet will help you understand this sensory loss and give you information and guidance that will help you reach successful communication, without those negative thoughts raising their heads.

‘Deaf’ or ‘Hearing-Impaired’?



We often say that someone is ‘deaf’ but, in truth, it’s not so cut and dried. Like sight problems, hearing loss comes in varying degrees and so everyone is different. However, some generalisations can be made that will help your understanding:-

- **Profound Deafness.** This can be categorised as a total loss and those who are born profoundly deaf may enter into the deaf community. Of the fifty thousand sign language users, many were born into deaf families but not all. Imagine the difficulty of understanding spoken words when you have never heard the sounds that accompany those lip patterns. *Beat, meat, peat*, which one was it, as that first letter looks no different on the speaker’s lips. Was that *fifteen* or *fifty*, *cable* or *gable*, *hold* or *old*?
- **Hearing Impairment** can cover a multitude of differences, including reduced hearing, high or low frequency loss and tinnitus. Someone with reduced hearing may benefit from a hearing aid but what about the person with specific loss? High frequency means a problem with catching those high-pitched letters like *s, f* and *c* or *k*, whereas low frequency loss means those vowels (*a, e, i, o* and *u*) and those low-pitched letters like *b, m, p* and *d* are falling by the wayside. Tinnitus is often described as ringing in the ears, some say like an internal helicopter that just isn’t going anywhere.

Now couple any form of hearing-impairment with background noise and you have entered the world of nightmares. That’s hearing loss. So, when someone is said to be deaf, it seems to be a catch-all phrase for the deaf unaware who don’t really know their next door neighbour or colleague’s personal fight with sound. You, as a counsellor, will benefit from knowing a little bit about your client’s type of hearing loss in that initial meeting, so that you can plan your communication strategy for future sessions.

How and When Does Hearing Loss Come About?

It’s the ‘when’ of hearing loss that decides the individual’s new future. The ‘how’ could be that hearing loss comes about as the result of genetics, illness (e.g. German measles, meningitis and mumps) early in life, accident as in a head trauma, industrial deafness as a result of work undertaken over a prolonged period of time, self-inflicted by subjecting oneself to loud noise e.g. nightclubs, fireworks, car radios or headphones for various music devices, or as an age-related

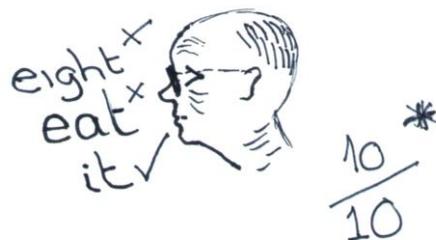
onset. The list of ‘how’ clearly shows that loss of hearing can occur at any age and the ‘when’ says how the future will be.

We talk about pre-lingual and post-lingual deafness, which simply means that hearing loss occurred either before the individual had mastered sound and speech or after that milestone. If loss is pre-lingual, that little baby will find it very difficult to read lips, as he or she didn’t get a chance to get those lip patterns under his or her belt, before loss came about. These are the children who may find sign language the way forward though, because their parents and siblings may be hearing, this will involve a different route of understanding to that of his or her deaf peers from deaf families.

If hearing is lost at around ten years old, the child has a good grasp of sounds and also has some understanding of vocabulary – but only that of a ten year old. Throughout our lives, we learn more vocabulary and the level held by a ten year old may be only a small percentage of what can be achieved in a lifetime.. Still, the child may stay within the hearing world, preferring to read lips to learning sign. One thing is for sure and that is that this young person will call upon the other senses for information. This doesn’t only include sight, smell, touch and taste but picking up on gestures, facial expression and other people’s reactions to current situations e.g. eye movement or sudden posture change.

The later the onset of hearing loss, the more vocabulary the individual will have had access to and, as we are aware, we all tend to look at a person’s lips when they are talking. For some whose hearing loss is gradual, reading lips has already started unknowingly, hiding the fact that something is indeed amiss with how sounds are being perceived.

So does this mean that reading lips is easier for those who lose their hearing much later in life? Well, yes and no. One may have been reading lips unknowingly for some time but, with age, one may also develop some form of sight loss, so reading lips may not be that easy after all. And, as already described, some letters and words are very difficult to read anyway.



Points to Address for Successful Counselling Communication

The Environment

Believe it or not but the room you're standing in can sometimes affect communication.

1. High ceilings cause echoes, as do the lack of soft furnishings (a room empty of tables, chairs and sofas etc. will show you how your voice creates an echo). A comfortable room with soft armchairs and rugs does the trick wonderfully and this in itself is what a counsellor's room usually addresses.
2. Background noise in the form of any sound from outside your dedicated counselling room can make understanding very difficult for those with a little residual hearing or those wearing a hearing aid. This problem can be easily solved by fitting a loop system around the walls of your room. It's simply a box about the size of a car radio, with wire that comes from each end and that same wire is stapled to the walls of your room at about waist height. If your client is wearing a hearing aid, he or she simply adjusts a switch (a 'T' switch) on the hearing aid and, with your loop system switched on, the client hears nothing but what happens within that wire loop.
3. If light is in the face of the lipreader, he or she will have little chance of reading lips, so attention needs to be directed to making sure the light is coming from behind the lipreader rather than from behind the speaker. Make use of the natural light coming through a window, with the client looking into the room and the natural light shining onto your face. Another option is to place an angle-poise lamp on a table, with the light directed to your face, highlighting your lip patterns for the client to read more clearly.

Tweaking our Method of Communication in a Hearing World

As hearing people, conversation is easy and the points of difficulty for those with hearing-loss may not be obvious to us. Once the environment has been addressed, our common method of communication needs a few tiny but very important adjustments to aid communication:-

1. We are all very guilty of turning away when we are talking. Well, it's not a sin in the hearing world but for someone with a hearing loss, it's a difficult moment, as the lipreader misses out on a lot of what is being said and may respond inappropriately to his or her guess at what really was said. This should not be an area to address in a counselling situation, though it is still a point to be aware of in life in general.

2. How many times have you been speaking while you were chewing something (e.g. chewing gum or even a pencil) at the same time? This makes reading lip shapes so difficult, because the shapes are no longer true to the words being spoken. Make your lip patterns clear, to aid understanding.
3. In life in general (i.e. outside a counselling session) we're all guilty of talking over the top of each other but, for the person with hearing loss, deciphering two communications at the same time will be very difficult indeed. Also, depending on the degree of loss, the individual may not know where the next voice is coming from and so miss out on the beginning of a sentence, calling on the need for guesswork once again. In these cases, indicating who is speaking next is a must, to allow the lipreader to adjust his or her gaze, ready for the next delivery of communication.
4. Don't shout or slow your speech too much, as shouting will exaggerate your lip patterns and sentences are best read as a whole, rather than as almost 'stand alone' words.



Body Language and Facial Expression

They say that only twenty percent of communication comes from the spoken word and that the rest comes from body language, gesture and facial expression. You can easily test this for yourself by turning off the volume on your television programme and deciding what you understand only from what you can see. The three points listed under 'communication in the hearing world' will become apparent as you try to make your best guess at reading lips and you will automatically tune into what you can see rather than what you can hear.

Did you realise that we all talk with our eyes, shoulders, hands, head and much more?

Try the following moves and see what they may tell you:-

1. Lift your shoulders – isn't this what you do when you say 'I don't know'?
2. Drop your shoulders – 'I'm really disappointed.'

3. Stretch your whole arm and your upturned hand with a vertical palm out in front of you – ‘Stop!’



4. Open your mouth as wide as possible – ‘what (shock and horror)!’
5. Twist your nose up – ‘I don’t want to / I’m not happy about it’.
6. Stretch your mouth to show your tightly-closed teeth – ‘I wouldn’t, if I was you.’

No doubt you would have been picking up on similar gestures and facial expressions as you tried to follow that programme earlier. The examples I have listed are but a few of many possibilities, evidence that words aren’t always needed to get your message across.

Body language and facial expression aren’t new things that you need to take on board, as it’s something we all do naturally. When talking to a person with hearing loss, simply be aware how important this silent information is to successful communication.

Extra Support for Lipreaders

Here, we touch on the role of the professional lipspeaker though, in counselling sessions, you will be able to take these points on board yourself.

Word Confusion and the Lipspeaker’s Clarification

As indicated earlier, many letters are not readable on the lips but, like *beat*, *meat* and *peat*, these letters only become a problem if there exists a word very similar to the one you are saying (e.g. *beat*, *meat* and *peat* as already mentioned, or *cable* and *gable*). Many words are very lipreadable, like hospital, holiday and caravan, so such words in context will need no extra support. For those words that may be confused with others, there is something very easy that can be done to support the lipreader.

When you’re talking to a lipreader, draw the first letter of the difficult word (in capital form) just in front of your own body and draw it the way you would write it, which means that the lipreader is seeing it’s mirror image, which still makes perfect sense. The perfect position for your hand is to

imagine that your elbow is attached to your waist (on the same side of your body as your poised hand) and to use your index finger to draw that first letter within the shadow of your own body. Draw this letter at the same time you are shaping or sounding it with your lips and the lipreader will pick up on its shape at the same time that he or she is engaged in reading your lips. If it's a number that is difficult to read (*fifteen* or *fifty*, *sixteen* or *sixty* etc.), draw the number in front of your own body, to help clarify exactly which number is being said. Such a small movement makes lipreading that difficult letter so much easier and the word more quickly identifiable. This is one of the roles of the lipspeaker which, in an everyday situation, can also be performed by family and friends.

Clearing any Remaining Confusion

Of course, if the individual has some sight loss and can't pick up on the letter you have drawn, they will be relying solely on how much they can see and hear, so try rewording your sentence with easier words. Another tactic would be to make your sentences shorter, giving only the necessary information, or even writing it down in bold letters.

What Else does the Professional Lipspeaker Bring to Successful Understanding?

Though a lipspeaker is trained to keep his or her head and body very steady for the lipreader to concentrate on, there are subtle movements which do aid understanding.

1. Body language as already discussed is used subtly, so that the lipreader gets a feel for the words being spoken. Eyes can stress intensity or mood, eyebrows can announce questions and lip shapes can show emotion.
2. By the very slightest movement of the head in the direction of one of the shoulders, the lipspeaker can indicate the past and with ever so slight a movement of the neck and chin in a forward direction, the future is implied. Try it and remember that *subtle* is how it must be.
3. An experienced lipspeaker will also pare down the words being spoken, removing a word here or there but still delivering the whole essence of the communication. The shorter message means that the lipreader is under a lesser strain to keep up with the speed of the conversation, concentrating on the more relevant information rather than trying to lipread something that isn't going to help the conversation along.



Should you wish to enrol on a course of lipspeaking, contact CACP in Durham for possible venues. Tel. 0191 383 1155 / fax 0191 383 7914 / Email – durham@cacdp.demon.co.uk / or visit www.cacdp.org.uk

The Profoundly Deaf World of Sign Language

The language of sign is just as rich as any spoken language and, believe it or not, there are some signs used which indicate regional differences, meaning that a deaf 'Geordie' will be easily identified, as will a sign language user from London! In the same way that not everyone in the world has English as their native language, sign language changes from country to country too: many words have different signs and some countries use a one-handed alphabet rather than the two-handed version used in the United Kingdom.

Sign language is also a living language. Like our spoken language changes with time (e.g. 'telephone' to 'mobile'), signs change too. The way you hold a landline telephone hand piece or a smaller mobile phone is different and so is the 'picture' created for these words during conversation. The sign for 'toast' has moved through generations from one which indicates making toast on the fire, through an eye-level grill sign to a pop-up toaster. See the pictures in your mind's eye and enter the world of sign.

In this rich language, you will also find that a word cannot be narrowed down to one sign. Remember that the sign creates a picture and, looking simply at the word *back*, appreciate that the sign cannot be the same in the cases of 'to back (to support)', 'to come back (to return)' and to have a 'bad back'.

Emotions are indicated by the force of the sign or by facial expression and gesture. A simple example to practise is the word *love*:-

I love tomatoes / I love my mother / I love Ferraris

Feel the difference in the strength of that *love* word in each phrase and recognise the difference in your face's contribution to this message, even without any conscious effort from yourself.

Sentence structure is very different too. Where we may say 'last week, I went to the shops', sign language may deliver the same communication as 'last week, me, where, shops'. Our spoken sentences are dressed with small words that guarantee flow e.g. 'which is your favourite flower in that garden'. In sign, this might become 'there (pointing to the garden) your favourite flower which'. Sign language delivers the important words only.

Signs are also directional. For example, the difference between 'I phone you' or 'you phone me' will be the direction in which the hand sign for *telephone* travels. The same applies to 'I will meet you' and 'you meet me', 'bring me a cup of tea' and 'I'll bring you a cup of tea'. In the signing structure of the last example, 'cup of tea' may be the only visible sign but the movement indicates who is doing what and the facial expression indicates a fact or a question (*do this* or *will you bring me ?*).

Total Communication

When we talk about deafness, we may refer to ‘total communication’ – using everything available to understand the message. Remembering that spoken words deliver as little as twenty per cent of a total communication, we can appreciate that profoundly deaf people, as well as hearing and hearing-impaired, are also looking at facial expression, gesture, body language and lip patterns.

Speaking with a Sign Language User

The language of sign is very fulfilling and, should you go down the route of learning the language, the number one point to remember is to forget your own spoken language: don’t try to find the individual words but focus on identifying the overall picture in the communication being delivered. Yes, there will be signs that you can identify as words but concentrating too much on this can sometimes stop you seeing the whole message. For local courses, approach your nearest college of further education.

If you simply want to make communication easier between yourself and a sign language user, remember the points mentioned earlier about preparing the environment, tweaking your style to facilitate the lip reading process and don’t dress your sentences with big words, when the message could have been delivered far more successfully with everyday ones. The profoundly deaf person may respond using voice but, if there still seems to be a little difficulty in either of you understanding, consider writing information down, keeping your sentences short and to the point.

When an Interpreter is Present

If your client is a sign language user and wishes to have counselling relayed via an interpreter, protocol is that, when addressing a deaf person, you look at that person and speak, while the deaf person will be looking at the interpreter to collect your information. When the deaf client responds, he or she will be looking at you. This three-way situation can seem very strange at first but time will allow you to almost ignore the third person. However, it is for you to decide if your skills are being put across and are proving as effective as they would in a hearing situation, as intonation and also the way the interpreter puts your words across may reach the deaf person in a manner different to that which you expected (i.e. lost in translation).

Summary of Content

I hope that this booklet has served its purpose of helping you enter into the world of hearing-loss without trepidation. Making successful communication with someone with hearing loss means making subtle changes to your normal way of communication – thoughtful changes which aren't going to affect your normal lifestyle but are going to mean so much to the individual who doesn't hear as clearly as you do. For the counsellor working with a client with hearing loss, these subtle changes could either make or break the success of that initial session.

Remember:-

1. Speak clearly and at a normal pace – shouting and slowing down doesn't really help understanding.
2. Some words and numbers are difficult to read on the lips. These can be made clearer by subtly drawing the first letter of the word, or the number in figures, in the shadow of your own body.
3. Be aware that the environment can sometimes make communication difficult e.g. high ceilings or empty rooms, background noise or bad lighting.
4. Make sure the lipreader can see your face, both to read your lips and pick up on facial expressions.
5. Body language and gesture happen naturally, so be aware that these are helping communication too.
6. If communication seems a little difficult, don't be afraid to pull out paper and pen. After all, counselling is about showing that you understand.

About the Author

Dee Watson spent many years working as a counsellor and also working in the deaf community. Now semi-retired, she lives in what she calls the 'outback' of Spain, spending most of her time writing and the rest simply 'being'.

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For any advice or support on hearing loss, please contact me at denise-watson1@hotmail.com

Other books by Dee Watson can be found at www.worthknowingbooks.com