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Impact of Masks on the Deaf Community

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4 MIN READ

While everyone has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in one way or another, the deafblind community has been affected in a detrimental way that most people may not have considered. With the already existing communication challenges, wearing masks has added yet another complicated barrier to communication between hearing and hearing impaired, hard of hearing, deaf and deafblind people. The word “deaf” can have different meanings depending on whether or not the D is capitalized. The word “deaf” with a lowercase d is a general term that includes all people with significantly reduced hearing. A person who is capital-D “Deaf” considers themselves part of the Deaf community and identifies with Deaf culture, which has its roots in American Sign Language (ASL)1. For the purpose of this article, we’ll focus on the Deaf community. Approximately 53% of deaf people ages 25-64 are employed2. Since June is National Safety Month, we felt it was important to bring attention to the Deaf community in particular, as they are struggling with the current situation, perhaps more than most. The Deaf Community in the United States Here are some quick facts about the Deaf community in America from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD)3:

- About two to three out of every 1,000 children in the United States are born with a detectable level of hearing loss in one or both ears.
- More than 90 percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents.
- One in eight people in the United States (13 percent, or 30 million) aged 12 years or older has hearing loss in both ears, based on standard hearing examinations.

Since not everyone can communicate using American Sign Language (ASL), most Deaf people have adapted by becoming skilled lipreaders. Deaf people also heavily rely on facial expressions. By not being able to see half of a person’s face, a critical source of information is being lost. In response to this, people are encouraged to use masks with transparent mouth pieces. Here is a simple DIY accessible, deaf-friendly face mask from the Hearing, Speech & Deaf Center (HSDC). According to the HSDC, no matter who you’re communicating with, the most important thing to remember is that you should work together with the other person to create an accessible environment2. Disregarding a Deaf person by telling them “never mind” or “it doesn’t matter” makes them feel unvalued and left out. Tips for Communicating with Deaf People Here are some helpful tips and reminders from the HSDC on communicating with the Deaf1:

1. If a Deaf person is not looking directly at you, get their attention first by waving your hand in their line of sight (this is how Deaf people get the attention of one another). If they’re not facing you, move yourself into their line of sight. If that’s not possible, lightly tap them on the shoulder.
2. Deaf people are very visual so be mindful of your body language. Use gesturing and clear facial expressions when speaking. “Acting out” what you’re saying can also be a useful tool.

3. Thinking that Deaf people will understand 100% of what is being said because they are lipreading is a myth. The most skilled lipreaders still only understand about 25% of what is being said. It's more of a supplement in conversation than the only tool used.
4. Be mindful of communicating in groups when a Deaf person is involved. The back-and-forth nature of a group conversation can be difficult to follow and mentally exhausting. Speak one at a time. Try raising your hand and wait to be acknowledged before you start speaking to cut down on the confusion.
5. Communicate in writing. However, don't judge a Deaf person's ability to use proper English and grammar. Most Deaf people haven't received the same education as hearing children and English is a second language for many Deaf people, with ASL being their first.

Tips for Communicating with Someone who is Lipreading1

1. As stated before, don't forget the importance of body language when speaking.
2. Keep your mouth and eyes visible and avoid chewing while you talk. Make sure there is proper lighting on your face.
3. Maintain eye contact with the person by facing them and not turning your back when you speak.
4. Speak clearly and enunciate, but don't shout or speak extremely slow. Changing the way you speak can actually make it harder to understand.
5. For men who have a thick moustache or beard, keep in mind, your lips are much harder to see and therefore lipread.

Misunderstandings Happen Despite everyone's best efforts, a miscommunication is bound to happen at some point and that's ok. Keep calm and try again by repeating yourself. Trying a different word, phrase, or method of communication. Whatever you do, resist the urge to give up. Your effort can make a big difference to a Deaf person, and you'll likely benefit from the experience too. There are a ton of resources out there, like this one from louisesattler.com that provides a free PDF download to familiarize yourself with COVID-19 specific signs and more resources for emergency situations. ASL sign for "Help" ASL sign for "Mask" ASL sign for "Sick" ASL sign for "Water" For additional information, check out the resource page from Coverage. They provide home additions and apps for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. They even include an infographic PDF with information for friends and family on how to be an ally to those with hearing loss.

1https://www.hsdc.org/services/deaf-101/ 2https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/news/employment-report-shows-strong-labor-market-passing-deaf-americans 3https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick-statistics-hearing



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