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# DEAF AWARENESS ESSENTIALS

A Simple Guide to Better  
Communication

# INTRODUCTION

## Why this matters

Most people do not think about communication until they face barriers. For many deaf people, communication barriers happen every day. Not because of deafness itself, but because the way we communicate often relies heavily on sound. Small changes can make a big difference.

## Who this guide is for

This guide is for anyone who:

- Has a deaf friend, family member, or colleague
- Meets deaf people in everyday life
- Wants to feel more confident communicating
- Is simply interested in learning more

## What you will gain

- Understand what deafness means in real life
- Challenge common assumptions
- Learn simple, practical communication tips
- Feel more confident in everyday situations





# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE DEAF?



**Some people are born deaf.**

**Some people lose their hearing later in life.**

**Some people use British Sign Language (BSL).**

**Some rely on lipreading.**

**Some use hearing aids or cochlear implants.**

**Some use a mix of different approaches.**

**Deafness is not one single experience.**

Identity is a deeply personal part of life. Deaf people may describe themselves in different ways, including Deaf, deaf, DeaF, deafened, or hard of hearing. These labels can reflect identity, language, or experience.

Deafness can be understood in more than one way. It may be connected to hearing and healthcare, or to identity, language, and community, particularly within the BSL community.

Many people sit somewhere in between.



# UNDERSTANDING COMMON TERMS

There is no single way to describe deafness. The terms people use often reflect identity, experience, and communication preferences. Not everyone will use these labels, and meanings can vary from person to person.

### Deaf (capital D)

Often used to describe people who identify as part of the Deaf community. This may include use of British Sign Language (BSL), shared cultural experiences, a strong sense of identity linked to Deaf culture.

### deaf (lowercase d)

Often used to describe the physical experience of hearing loss. This may include people who do not identify with Deaf culture, use spoken English as their main language, and may use BSL, hearing aids, or cochlear implants

### Deaf

A term some people use to reflect a mixed identity. This may include people who move between Deaf and hearing worlds, people with experiences across both sign language and spoken communication

### Deafened and hard of hearing

Often used by people who rely mainly on spoken communication.

**deafened:** hearing loss later in life, either sudden or gradual

**hard of hearing:** partial hearing, which may vary depending on the environment

# UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION

## Why communication barriers happen

Communication barriers often arise because everyday interactions rely heavily on sound. For deaf people, access to information can be reduced or inconsistent depending on the environment and how communication happens.

Barriers are often unintentional, but they can still have a real impact.

Common barriers include:

- People speaking while looking away
- Poor lighting that makes faces hard to see
- Background noise
- Fast or unclear speech
- Multiple people speaking at the same time





# LIPREADING EXPLAINED

**Lipreading is a way of using visual information to support understanding.**

This includes lip patterns, facial expressions, and context.

However, lipreading can have limits:

- Many sounds look the same on the lips
- Only part of speech is visible
- It requires concentration
- It can be tiring over time





# BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE (BSL) EXPLAINED

**British Sign Language (BSL) is a visual language with its own grammar and structure.**

BSL is a language in its own right, the same as French, for example. It is not based on spoken English. Barriers can happen when no interpreter is provided, Information is only shared in spoken or written English.

It's important to remember that BSL is a complete language. Access requires appropriate support, not just written English.



# HEARING TECHNOLOGY EXPLAINED

**Some deaf people use hearing technology such as hearing aids or cochlear implants.**

These devices can support access to sound, but they do not restore natural hearing. Technology can support communication, but it does not remove the need for clear communication and accessible environments.

Barriers can still happen due to background noise, distance from the speaker, poor sound quality, and fast or unclear speech.



# THE IMPORTANCE OF VISUAL ACCESS

**Reducing barriers can often come down to improving visual access.**

- Being able to see the speaker clearly
- Good lighting
- Clear facial expressions
- Using gestures or written support where helpful

## **In practice**

Small adjustments can remove barriers before they become a problem.





# SIMPLE WAYS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

**Clear communication reduces barriers for everyone.**

Reducing barriers does not require specialist knowledge. Small, practical changes can make communication more accessible straight away.

- **Face the person when you speak**
- **Keep your mouth visible**
- **Speak clearly at a natural pace**
- **Do not shout**
- **Use plain, direct language**
- **Make sure lighting is good**
- **Pause between key points**
- **Check understanding in a natural way**

# COMMUNICATION SUPPORT EXPLAINED



Sometimes barriers cannot be removed through simple adjustments alone. Communication support helps provide full access. The right support depends on the individual and the situation.

## Captions / Speech-to-Text Reporting

Speech is converted into text, either live or after the event. Used when:

- Someone prefers written English
- In meetings, training, or online content

## Lipspeaking / Signed Lipspeaking

A lipspeaker repeats speech clearly and silently, using natural lip patterns and expression. Used when:

- Someone relies on lipreading
- Visual clarity is needed in fast or complex situations

## BSL interpreting

A BSL interpreter translates between spoken English and British Sign Language. Used when:

- A deaf person uses BSL as their main language
- A hearing person needs to communicate with a BSL user



# EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

**Communication barriers can appear in everyday settings, so planning ahead helps reduce them.**

Accessible communication is a shared responsibility. It should not rely on the deaf person to manage every barrier. Small changes in awareness and behaviour can remove many barriers before they arise.

- **Share meeting agendas in advance**
- **Ensure one person speaks at a time**
- **Provide communication support where needed**
- **Make it clear who is speaking**
- **Manage turn-taking**
- **Use platforms with reliable captions**
- **Share key information in writing**
- **Speak clearly and avoid interruptions**

# NEXT STEPS

You do not need to get everything right.

What matters is recognising where barriers exist and taking steps to reduce them, and building confidence comes from understanding how communication works in different situations.

Clear communication improves understanding, confidence, and inclusion. If you want to build this into your everyday interactions or across your team, our Deaf Awareness Training will take you further.

**GET 10% OFF OUR DEAF AWARENESS TRAINING USING THE CODE BELOW**

**ESSENTIALS10**

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- **Identify communication barriers and take practical steps to reduce them**
- **Communicate clearly and confidently in meetings, training, and one-to-one situations**
- **Understand when and how to use BSL interpreters, lipspeakers, or captions**
- **Make appropriate adjustments in line with the Equality Act**
- **Create more accessible and inclusive environments for deaf people**
- **Build confidence across your team, not just individually**