Tips for Communicating With a Person With Hearing Loss

When you’re communicating with someone who has a hearing loss, there are many strategies you can use. Each person with hearing loss has different communication needs but there are some general tips you can use to help make your communication flow more smoothly and reduce the chance of communication breaking down.

1. Face the Person
Always gain the person’s attention before starting to speak. People with hearing loss are often more reliant on using visual cues to help them understand, so always face them while speaking. If you need to turn to the side or move away, stop speaking until you can face the person again.

2. Don’t Obscure Your Lips or Face
Someone with hearing loss will often pick up more information when watching your lips and facial expressions. Try not to obscure the view of your face while talking. Eating or chewing gum, drinking, scratching your beard or resting your chin in your hands are all common culprits.

3. Ensure Good Lighting
Communicate in a well-lit area. Position any light source such as a window behind the person with hearing loss, so there’s no glare and you can be seen clearly.

4. Reduce Background Noise and Distractions
People with hearing loss often find it harder to hear when there is a lot of noise in the background. Distractions such as a TV or photocopier can also mean it’s harder for the person to concentrate on your conversation. Move away from distractions or to a quieter area before beginning your conversation.

5. State the Topic Upfront
Sometimes a person with hearing loss can get left behind when the topic changes. By saying the topic upfront before you start talking, it can help narrow down the communication and reduce the need to ask for clarification. For example, you might say “The football – did you go to the game on the weekend?”

6. Slow Down Slightly and Speak Up a Bit
It’s common to think that speaking very slowly or shouting will help you be understood more easily by someone with hearing loss. In fact, shouting or over-exaggerating words can make it much more difficult for the person with hearing loss to understand you, because your speech sounds distorted, flat and unnatural. It can help if you slow down your speech rate slightly and raise your voice a little if you usually tend to speak a little quieter than others. Using varied tone can also assist.
7. Think about Distance
Try and communicate when standing a usual distance from the person with hearing loss. If you’re too close or far away it will be harder for the person to see you. Avoid shouting from another room when the person with hearing loss can’t see you.

8. Rephrase, Rather Than Repeat
If the person didn’t hear you the first time, it’s likely they will continue to have difficulty if you just repeat yourself. Instead, say it a different way. For example, if the person didn’t hear you say “Do you take milk with your tea?”, you could say “Black or white tea: which do you prefer?”

9. Use Gestures and Facial Expression
You can help add more meaning to your speech by adding natural gestures and ensuring you use appropriate facial expressions.

10. Write Down Key Words
Write down important information such as names or phone numbers to reduce misunderstandings.

Remember: Communication Is a Two-Way Process
Most importantly, every person with hearing loss has different communication needs. Don’t presume to know what strategies will be most effective to use with every person with hearing loss. By asking the person with hearing loss what you can do to help the communication flow more smoothly, you demonstrate respect and a willingness to take equal responsibility to make the communication work.

If communication breaks down, don’t say “don’t worry, it wasn’t important anyway”. Ask the person with hearing loss how you can modify your communication exchange to make it more effective.

Guide Dogs Hearing Services
Guide Dogs Hearing Services provides assistance and support to any adult who has a hearing impairment or who has both a vision and hearing loss. We provide a range of individual services, group training programs, products and advice. Appointments are necessary. To contact us, email info@guidedogs.org.au or telephone (08) 8203 8394.