

## Hearing loss - what to tell your colleagues

Communication at work can be difficult if you have a hearing loss, especially if your colleagues don't know what to do. It's worth remembering that many people who shy away from talking with you are just nervous of making a mistake or offending you. There are many ways to improve communication with your colleagues.

It's a good idea to tell people the best way to talk with you. In most cases, your direct approach will be appreciated.

### Explain your hearing loss

Your colleagues may know little or nothing about your particular hearing impairment. To communicate effectively with you, they need to know specific details. Suggestions include:

- Avoid the blanket statement, 'I'm deaf'. Instead, describe the nature of your hearing loss. For example, you might say: 'I have trouble hearing voices if there's a lot of background noise'.
- Print out the Better Health Channel companion article *Hearing loss – communicating with a hearing impaired colleague* and distribute it among your colleagues. This article offers a range of communication suggestions to people who work with hearing impaired individuals.
- Tell your colleagues how best to talk with you. For example, tell them it will help if they speak more slowly. Ask them to be a reasonable distance from you and to make sure that their face is adequately lit.
- Ask them to raise the volume of their voice slightly and use appropriate visual clues.
- Ask them to rephrase rather than repeat things you have difficulty with, and write down critical information such as dates, times, addresses, telephone numbers, peoples' names, amounts of money.
- If you have a more pronounced hearing loss on one side, tell people which is your 'good side'. Explain that gauging direction can be difficult for you.
- Explain how your specialised devices (such as the TTY) work and let them know if you wear hearing aids or use a speech processor.

### Meniere's and tinnitus

If you suffer from tinnitus or Meniere's disease, let work colleagues know how this might affect you – for example, you may become dizzy and nauseous and need to lie down. You may not be able to drive or operate machinery at this time.

### Offer positive feedback

Some people may avoid talking to you because they are afraid to make a mistake or offend you. Remember that people are more likely to repeat a new behaviour if they get positive feedback. When someone makes an effort to communicate with you in the ways you have requested, thank them. This will boost their confidence, and make them feel more comfortable when talking to you next time.

To help your colleagues 'loosen up' about your disability, share stories with them about times when you've misheard something. Encourage them to laugh along with you. If they feel that you're relaxed and open, they will be too. Similarly, if they know that conversational errors don't upset you, they won't feel mortified when they make a 'mistake'.

### Special equipment

Discuss your special equipment needs with your employer. Devices that could help improve communication in the workplace include:

- Access to fax and email
- Telephone typewriter (TTY)
- Mobile phone for SMS text messages
- Vibrating pager
- Audio loop
- Assistive listening device for meetings or one-on-one communication
- Volume-enhanced telephone
- Volume-control earpiece for the telephone.

## Suggestions for meetings

You may find it difficult to follow conversation when there are a number of people talking. Suggestions for business meetings include:

- Request a written agenda beforehand.
- Make sure you tell your employer in advance if you need an interpreter or an assistive hearing device.
- Sit next to or near the person who takes the minutes. If you're unsure of what was said, you can look over their notes. Use of a laptop computer will make it easier for you to read notes or minutes.
- If you lip-read, sitting a little distance back from the main speaker is helpful. If you are in a lecture hall, for example, the second or third row is generally best.
- If the person chairing the meeting isn't aware that you have a hearing impairment, let them know before the meeting starts. Tell them how they can best adapt their chairing. For example, you might ask them to keep their face aimed squarely at you. Ask others to face you when speaking, speak one at a time and avoid obscuring their faces by looking down or putting their hand up to their mouth.
- Ask the person who is chairing the meeting to repeat any questions that are asked before responding to them. If documents are to be read, ask them to read at a slower pace or give you a copy to read for yourself.

## Other communication tips

General suggestions include:

- Don't expect to hear everything. Remember that people without hearing impairments don't always hear everything that is said to them.
- Rely on your eyes. In many cases, you can use visual cues like body language and facial expressions to fill in the blanks.
- Tell people what part of the sentence you didn't get. For example, you might say, 'I missed the last part' or 'What was the first word?'
- If you're having trouble understanding the person, tell them why. For example, if their accent is confusing, explain you need a little time to 'catch on'.
- Some people will be easier to understand than others. Stay close to these people in group situations.
- Accept that colleagues may feel shy, so initiate conversations from time to time.
- Carry a notepad and pen. If communication is difficult, writing it down may be the best option.

## Where to get help

- Better Hearing Australia Tel. (03) 9510 1577 TTY (03) 9510 3499, Fax (03) 9510 6076, email: [bhavic@betterhearing.org.au](mailto:bhavic@betterhearing.org.au)
- Vicdeaf Tel. (03) 9473 1111
- Victorian Council of Deaf People Inc. (VCOD) Tel. (03) 9521 2466
- Deafness Foundation, Victoria Tel. (03) 9738 2909
- Meniere's Australia Tel. 1300 368 818
- National Relay Service (operator assisted calling of TTY telephone numbers, available 24 hours) Tel. 133 677
- Information on National Relay Service Tel. 1300 555 727

- Australian Communication Exchange (for provision of telephone typewriters) Tel. (07) 3815 7600, TTY. (07) 3815 7602
- Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association Tel. 0402 888 560
- Communication Rights Australia. Tel. (03) 9555 8552
- The Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital Tel. (03) 9929 8666
- Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services - Disability Services Program Tel. (02) 9263 3818

## Things to remember

- Many people who shy away from talking with you are just nervous of making a mistake or offending you.
- Let work colleagues know how best to talk with you - in most cases, your direct approach will be appreciated.
- In many cases, you can use visual cues like body language and facial expressions to fill in the blanks.

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