

talking hands 🙌

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1.4 Deaf culture



How to approach deaf people

1.4 Deaf culture

- There is a big difference between the medical and cultural definition of deafness. From the medical point of view, it is a disability caused by hearing loss, which can happen at any moment in life. Now, from the cultural perspective, it is a different way to experience life not based on sounds. Usually, these two concepts are differentiated between people who are deaf (medically) and Deaf (culturally).
- It often comes as a surprise that many deaf people refer to themselves as being members of the Deaf community and ascribe to Deaf culture. These people view themselves as a unique cultural and linguistic minority who use sign language as their primary language. The characteristics of Deaf culture are formed out of many shared life experiences rooted in a visual world designed for communication ease.
- All deaf people have a certain identity, and which identity they will form depends on many factors. One of the key factors influencing the formation of identity is the mastery of spoken or sign language. Which language is more prevalent during schooling and growing up depends on the time and degree of hearing impairment, the type of school they attend or have attended, and the hearing status of their parents. Cultural identification is prone to change, during life hard of hearing and deaf people can change their cultural orientation. However, it is important to be guided by the culture in which they feel comfortable and accepted.

- As a linguistic minority, deaf people share many similar life experiences, which manifests into the deaf culture. According to the World Federation of the Deaf, it includes “beliefs, attitudes, history, norms, values, literary traditions and art shared by those who are Deaf”. Also, probably the main aspect of deaf culture is the use of Sign Language as the main form of communication.
- The media and others in society sometimes use terms such as hearing impaired, deaf-mute, deaf and dumb, and hearing deficient to refer to deaf people. Within the Deaf community, these terms are seen as offensive because they imply that the deaf individual is “broken” or “inferior.” A generic and more widely accepted term is deaf and hard of hearing, which refers to all people with hearing loss. The term deaf may also be used in an all-inclusive manner to include people who identify as, deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired.
- **In summary, deafness is not something that needs to be fixed, it is just a different way to experience life, rooted in a visual world.**

History of deaf culture

- The term 'deaf culture' was first introduced by Carl G. Croneberg to discuss the similarities between deaf and hearing cultures, in the 1965 Dictionary of American Sign Language..
- However, the key event in history that strengthened deaf culture was the 1988 Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet University. A huge protest erupted at the time when a hearing person was chosen to be the 7th president of the institution, while running against two other deaf professionals. After days of protesting and students having taken over the campus, the hearing candidate resigned and Dr. I. King Jordan, a deaf professor, was appointed the new president.
- The movement received international media attention and is now known as the deaf community's seminal civil rights accomplishment. It is important to highlight that Gallaudet is an important icon for deaf culture, being the only liberal arts college for deaf students in the world.

What is unique about deaf culture?

- Every culture is unique on its own and has its characteristic traits. As we have said before, Sign Language is deeply valued in Deaf culture. Also, people develop deep connections with each other, creating a very powerful nationwide network.

- As any other culture, it also has strong cultural traditions in its organizations, such as deaf clubs, schools and religious institutions. It also developed its specific norms and behaviors, like a communication etiquette, which we will explore further along.

What are examples of deaf culture?

- Deaf culture can vary depending on the community's country of origin or intersection with other cultures. However, some aspects tend to stay the same everywhere. These can become great examples of deaf culture, such as collectivism, use of Sign Language and a direct and blunt way to communicate.

There are some key aspects that represent deaf culture:

- **Language:** the use of Sign Language- It is important to know that Sign Languages have their own structural and grammatical composition and rules. They are not just a signed translated version of the country's oral language.
- **Values:** it is essential to preserve Sign Language literature, heritage and other forms of arts and legacies. Alongside that, clear communication is very much valued as well.
- **Traditions:** stories from other deaf generations, shared experiences and participating in important events for the community.

- **Norms:** communication etiquette is a must. You have to know about the importance of eye contact, how to communicate and get people's attention properly. For example, when trying to call for someone, instead of shouting their name, try tapping on their shoulder or delicately turning the lights on and off.
- **Identity:** accepting and recognizing one self as part of this community, participating and being proud of its culture and heritage.
- **Behavior:** Within Deaf culture there are behaviors that are considered rude, but which are perfectly acceptable in hearing culture, and vice versa. Some examples are:
 1. Eye contact - Eye contact is extremely important. Hearing people often talk to each other with comparatively little eye contact, but within Deaf culture, avoiding eye contact can be seen as rude. Looking away while someone is signing to you is definitely a no-no.
 2. Touch - In Deaf culture, it is acceptable to touch another person to gain their attention, even if you do not know them well. However, there are rules about where or how to touch. A light touch on the arm or shoulder is acceptable.
 3. Physical proximity - When two hearing people are having a conversation they often sit or stand close to each other, sometimes side by side. Deaf people sit or stand further apart and preferably opposite each other so that they can see each other's "signing space" comfortably. This physical distance may appear unfriendly to hearing people, but Deaf people usually find it uncomfortable trying to converse in close physical proximity.

2. Directness - Acceptable levels of directness vary considerably between all cultures. From Deaf people's perspective, hearing people seem to say things in oblique and roundabout ways. From hearing people's point of view, Deaf people may appear blunt or abrupt. These are cultural differences which need to be understood and accommodated.

3. Who are you? - When Deaf people meet each other for the first time, or when they introduce each other, they will often provide more personal details than a hearing person might. They always give their first and last names, because there is a higher chance, in a small community, that this will provide information about their family or community connections. This can be particularly important if they come from a family with several generations of Deaf people - such families are considered to be at the core of the Deaf community. They will often add other information about their associations with particular places, sporting or cultural organizations, or the school they attended.

4. The long goodbye - When Deaf people are leaving a gathering of friends (and Deaf people who belong to the Deaf community tend to have many friends) they take much longer than most hearing people do to say goodbye. The custom is to seek out one's friends and in the process of saying goodbye, discuss when they next expect to meet. Since there are so many people to say goodbye to and so many future arrangements (vague or concrete) to make, it takes a long time before the person actually leaves.

5. Thumping on tables or floors - Deaf people often thump on tables or floors to gain each other's attention, in the same way as hearing people call a person's name or shout. It's quite easy to get the attention of a hearing person, we can call them by name or, if we don't know the person, say: "Excuse me, ...". To start a sign language conversation with someone, you must first make eye contact. If the person is not looking at you, you can get their attention in several ways:

6. Waving - how much you wave your hand depends on where the person you want to call is located, just as the volume of your voice, when calling someone, depends on the distance of the person from you. If the person is close, it is enough to wave your hand slightly, and if he is further away or not looking at you, then the movements are more pronounced. Definitely do not wave in front of the person's face, it is considered rude! If the person is at a greater distance from you, you can always ask other people to relay your "call". Conversations in sign language, unlike spoken languages, can be conducted at a much greater distance.

7. A light touch on the shoulder or upper arm - if you failed to get the person's attention by waving, touch them lightly on the shoulder.

8. By kicking the floor or by alternately turning on and off the lights- this method is usually used at large gatherings, when you want to gain the attention of several people. Deaf people feel the vibration on the floor and always turn towards the source.

Interesting facts about Deaf culture

- CODA - This is an acronym for the Child of Deaf Adults. It represents all hearing people with a deaf mother or father, or even both! CODAs are usually part of the deaf community. Even though they are hearing people, they embody deaf culture and are huge activists for the deaf cause.
- SIGN NAMES - Sign names are nicknames which are given because it's faster to use a single sign than to fingerspell full names, or as a token of affection. Having a sign name is an important aspect of deaf culture and helps you to feel part of the community. Sign names should be given by deaf people and usually come from something that identifies the person because of the way they look, their hobbies and interests, or perhaps something that sounds like their name. For example, somebody called Daisy might be given the sign name of a flower. Somebody who has really curly hair might be given a sign name that reflects the curls coming down from their head. It's important that sign names are respectful and that, if you're giving someone a sign name, the person is happy with what you've chosen – especially if you're picking up on a physical feature or habit. Make sure the person you're giving the sign name to is happy for people to use it, and respect their decision if they don't like it.

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