

# Telephone Tips for Communicating with Hard of Hearing Individuals

## **You may not know that the person you are speaking with is hard of hearing**

Approximately 34 million Americans, or about 10% of the population, have some degree of hearing loss. Hearing loss may range from mild (difficulty hearing or understanding soft sounds) to profound (inability to hear loud sounds). For a variety of reasons, many hard of hearing people do not always inform others of their hearing loss, making this “hidden” disability even more invisible to other people.

Hard of hearing people frequently communicate using a combination of strategies to maximize their residual hearing ability. They may supplement their hearing with devices such as hearing aids and assistive listening devices, and they may supplement what they do hear with additional visual information, through speech-reading (formerly called lip-reading) or reliance on written information or other tactics.

## **If the person asks you to repeat something more than once, consider the possibility that a hearing loss is involved**

If you find that you are asked to repeat information, please exercise patience. The person may be shy or embarrassed about their hearing loss, or may be trying to conceal it. People do not normally ask to have information repeated because they want to irritate the person they are talking to. They ask for repetition because they did not understand what was said. Getting irritated in response does not solve the problem, and in fact creates new ones. Don't be afraid to ask: “Are you having trouble hearing me today?” You can also ask the listener for specific advice: “What can I do to help you hear me or understand me better?”

## **Speak in a normal tone of voice**

Many times, when people learn that the listener is hard of hearing, they begin shouting into the phone in an effort to be heard. Shouting may have worked a many years ago, before hearing aids and telephones, but it creates real problems with today's phones and hearing aids. When people shout into a telephone (or at a person in the same room who wears a hearing aid), the resulting sound can become so distorted when it comes through the device (telephone, hearing aid, or both) that the words are much *harder* to understand than if they are spoken in a normal tone of voice. You may need to speak up slightly sometimes, but please do not yell. It is hard to avoid sounding angry when you raise your voice. Also, be sure that you are speaking directly into the telephone mouthpiece. Often when people hold the telephone in place by turning their head to the side for hands-free talking, the mouthpiece may be too far from the mouth to pick up speech properly.

## **Speak more slowly, not more loudly**

Instead of raising your voice, concentrate on speaking slower and more clearly. Use simpler sentences, not complex ones. Pause a few seconds at the end of a sentence or a phrase. Giving this additional “processing time” will help your listener to grasp one sentence's meaning before you move on to the next one. And be sure to enunciate clearly! This is easier to do if you're speaking more slowly.

## **Minimize background noise when you call**

Turn off televisions and radios in the room you are calling from, and be sure no other phone extensions are open. If you are in a noisy office environment, close your office door or move to a quieter place to call. If you are using a mobile phone, move to a quiet location to place a call.

*Avoid using the speakerphone setting on your phone.* The added background noise and sound distortion can make it harder for a hard of hearing person to understand you.

## **Ask the person to repeat things back to you, to make sure they have understood correctly**

In many cases, people are embarrassed about their hearing loss, and may try to hide it. They may pretend they've heard or understood something when in fact they haven't. Asking questions such as, “Did you hear me ok?” or “Do you understand what I'm saying?” could be perceived as a challenge or an insult. Instead, try asking for the specific information you have given out: “Just to make sure we have this all correct, can you read back to me the address you've just written down?” or “Help me clarify these steps. Who is the first person you are going to contact, and their phone number?” “Ok, now tell me your next step.”

## **Supplement speech with written material**

Many people with hearing loss are visually oriented. Whenever possible, try to provide the listener with ways to get the information they need in written format. For example, if a person is calling for information about a specific program, you can offer to send printed literature on the subject to his or her home, or send a written description in an e-mail message. You could mail the information, fax it, or refer callers to an Internet website. Then tell the caller to please call back to discuss any questions they have. This way, you know they will have the information in their hands and can guide them accordingly: “On page 4 of the booklet, you'll find a checklist for applying to this program...”

## **Investigate alternate ways to communicate**

Because many people with hearing loss have trouble with the phone, they adapt by using other means of communi-

cation instead. **ASK!** See if you can **mail** information to the person, and ask for a mailing address. Many people—hard of hearing or not—now use **email** more than the phone, and this is ideal for people with hearing loss. So ask for an email address—and keep it on file. Some hard of hearing people use a CapTel **captioned telephone** and may ask you to call them back through a toll-free number so that captions appear (see [www.captionedtelephone.com](http://www.captionedtelephone.com) for information). Or you can suggest that a person call you back using an **online relay service**, if the person has a computer and an Internet connection (high-speed or dial-up). This works like a TTY or tele-typewriter (used for years by deaf people), but a TTY machine is not needed. Instead, the hard-of-hearing caller goes to an Internet site like [www.SprintIP.com](http://www.SprintIP.com) or [www.IP-Relay.com](http://www.IP-Relay.com) (find others by searching for “online telephone relay service” at Google or Yahoo) to place the call. On the website, the person types their side of the conversation to the operator, and the operator voices that text to the other party, and then types the response and relays it to the hard of hearing person to read on the screen. This service is **free**, and no long-distance charges apply! Another option is online “Instant Messaging” (IM) or chat services, in which both parties type conversation back and forth. Again, a computer with an Internet connection is needed, and the chat software can be downloaded for free from AOL.com, Yahoo.com, MSN.com, or Google.com.

### **Keep telephone messages short and to the point, and repeat crucial information**

Be very careful when leaving a telephone message for a person who is hard of hearing. Above all, avoid leaving lengthy messages on answering machines or giving important, detailed information in a long message. The person may need to replay the message several times to understand all the words, and long messages make this process very difficult and time consuming. If people have trouble understanding phone messages, they cannot ask for an explanation, clarification, or restatement using other words, as they could in a live conversation. (In fact, if they can't make out the phone number or name left in the message, they may not even be able to contact you *at all* for clarification.) A better approach is to leave a brief message that states the caller's name clearly (spell it out—see the next tip), work affiliation, and a phone number to call back. And please: speak slowly when you give your phone number—most of us give out this information so often that we run the sounds together. We must remember to say the number more slowly for hard of hearing people

to understand it. Finally, if you repeat the phone number a second time in your message, you double your chances of being understood: “Again, my phone number is...”

### **Spell out detailed information clearly**

Many letters and numbers can sound alike if you are hard of hearing: “five” can sound “nine”, “one” can sound like “none”. And the letters “p” and “b”, “t” and “d”, and “s” and “f” can be difficult to tell apart when words are spelled out. To avoid potential confusion, spell out words using word cues for each letter: A as in Apple, B as in Broomstick, C as in Canary, and so on (or for those with military background, Able, Baker, Charlie, etc.). Choose words that are distinct: B as in Boy and T as in Toy can sound similar, while B as in Boxcar is hard to mistake. To convey numbers (a phone number, address, or account number) count up to the number in a string and stop at the proper number. For “325”, you would say “one, two, THREE, then one, TWO, then one, two, three, four, FIVE.”

### **Be flexible, be patient**

People with hearing loss adapt in a wide variety of ways, and there is no “one size fits all” solution to apply. Telephone communication presents special challenges, because hard of hearing people lack the visual cues they have come to rely on for in-person communications. You may need to minimize phone contacts in favor of face-to-face meetings in which the person can use their speech-reading and visual skills. Or you may need to adapt your company policies on email or IM chats to allow their use in some cases.

### **What can the CCDHH do to help?**

The Colorado Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing works across the state as an advocate for deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and deaf-blind persons. We provide information to any business, organization, or government entity that works with or provides services for individuals who have a hearing loss. CCDHH also provides services, information, and referrals to families and individuals who need special assistance.

We can provide:

- ◆ Free telecommunications equipment for low-income deaf and hard of hearing consumers
- ◆ Information and training for individuals and businesses working with deaf and hard of hearing persons
- ◆ Technical assistance to service providers
- ◆ Workshops and training for deaf and hard of hearing persons

We are here to assist you. Please call or write to us.

## **COLORADO COMMISSION FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING**

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