

Factsheet - Definitions

This factsheet aims to clear up any confusion you may have about how Deaf people or people with hearing loss are described or referred to. The reason why there are so many different definitions is simply because many professionals have different labels for Deaf people and people with hearing loss. Deafness or hearing loss also affects people differently and to different extents. There is also some politically correct stuff at work here too!

Hard of hearing

There are people who can hear quite well, but may need a bit more volume or clarity. They may miss the occasional word or vowel which can lead to mistakes. Hearing aids are often helpful in quiet situations. They are often referred to: “hard of hearing”. Sometimes people will call themselves as “very deaf” when they have a lot of trouble hearing things. Medical people also use the term “hearing impaired” for this group as it is considered a more acceptable word than either deaf or hard of hearing.

Deafened

This is often used to describe people who suddenly lose their hearing in adulthood. This could happen after illness or injury. The term “hearing impaired” or a person with “hearing loss” is also used for this group. See: <http://www.hearinglink.org/>

Partially hearing / deaf

Traditionally education authorities have separated out children into different categories. This describes children who have quite a lot of useful hearing but still need a hearing aid or a cochlear implant to help them hear well. Many can use the telephone with people they know well (and often it will not be realised that partially hearing people can't hear everything). Many people do not even realise that the partially hearing person can't hear everything.

Our vision

Deaf people fully participating and contributing as equal and valued citizens in wider society



Profoundly / severely deaf

These are two terms that education authorities have also used. They are used to describe children who are unable to understand speech sounds by listening. The latest cochlear implants are changing this and many children are now able to hear speech sounds so these two terms are now falling into disuse.

Deaf – But how do Deaf people describe themselves?

We use “Deaf” to describe ourselves as we identify ourselves as people with a strong cultural affinity with other Deaf people whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language (BSL). We use the word “deaf” without a capital “d” to describe those who don’t have BSL – an example of this is a deaf child in a hearing family that doesn’t use BSL.

But I don’t want to offend anyone!

The following terms are offensive and should not be used at all:

- deaf mute
- deaf and dumb
- deaf without speech

They are offensive because they assume the Deaf person cannot communicate – well. BSL is a language and many people find it a beautiful and exciting language to learn.

Don’t say “**the** deaf” – use “Deaf people”. Also avoid judgemental phrases such as: “suffering from deafness” or “afflicted by deafness” or “trapped in a world of silence”.

Okay – so what’s the right way then?

The simplest approach is to ask people how they want to be described. Many Deaf people are quite happy to use the word “Deaf” but someone who has lost their hearing in later life might find this offensive. They may prefer to be described as being “hearing impaired”. There is no right or wrong and the best way is to accept the person’s own preference.

Want to know more or support us?

We have a regularly updated website - www.bda.org.uk and a monthly magazine for members only - the British Deaf News!

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