



Language and Culture

Deaf Culture & Communication: A Basic Guide

The Deaf community in Australia is a diverse cultural and linguistic minority group that encompasses a vast network of social, political, religious, artistic and sporting groups – most who use Australian Sign Language (Auslan) as their primary mode of communication. Accepting deafness as part of a person's identity is the core element in developing a connection with the Deaf community; often described as Deaf with a capital 'D' to emphasise their deaf identity.

Identification with the Deaf community is a personal choice and does not depend on the degree of deafness, but rather identifying with the cultural model of deafness. Culturally Deaf people, whether they have hearing aids, cochlear implants or use sign language; see themselves as normal, not as abnormal hearing people.

Although the Deaf community is diverse in many ways, it shares attitudes and beliefs that bond as common experiences and is united by the use of Auslan. Auslan is a community language and is recognised by the Australian Government's National Language Policy. It is a visual and spatial language that has its own grammar, syntax and idioms which are different from that of English.

Advocates of the cultural perspective of deafness support the view that Deaf people are not a disabled group, but a linguistic minority group. This has united and politicised the Deaf community as they strive to achieve their maximum potential as equals in the community. Deaf people, like their hearing peers, have the same aspirations, needs and desires of a quality lifestyle that will reap benefits for them and their families. Pride in being Deaf now takes full force in a variety of ways such as Deaf festivals that are fostered each year across Australia and around the world during National Week of Deaf people.

As with many other language groups there are some distinct cultural behaviours that unite that culture. Here are some of the cultural differences that distinguish the Deaf community:

Eye Contact

Since a Deaf person cannot hear what is being said they rely on body language and facial expression for cues. If eye contact is broken the Deaf person will stop communicating. In Deaf culture to look away when a person is speaking to you is considered to be rude.

Touching/Gaining Attention

A Deaf person may use touch to gain another person's attention. It is appropriate to touch another person's upper arm to gain their attention if they are not looking in your direction or move into their visual field so they can have eye contact with you. Turning lights off and on in a crowded room will signify to Deaf participants the meeting/seminar/conference is ready to begin or about to close. If the floor is wooden you may see a Deaf person stamping on the floor so vibrations will alert the other person/s to the fact that he/she wishes to communicate with them.

Body Language/Facial Expressions

As mentioned before, body language/facial expression is an integral part of Auslan. In response to a question asked by a non Auslan skilled hearing person, a Deaf person may re-enact a situation using larger signs than usual and more exaggerated facial expressions to convey the intensity/gravity of the situation being explained. Exaggerated non-verbal expressions used by Auslan users can sometimes be misinterpreted and/or misunderstood by members of the wider community resulting in a communication break down.

Nodding

It must not be assumed the nodding of a Deaf person in response to a signed message necessarily signifies agreement with what is being signed.

The nod may indicate an understanding of the message rather than agreement or an understanding of the signs used rather than the information presented to acknowledge the person is paying attention to what is being signed.

Communicating with Deaf People

Firstly, gain the Deaf person's attention by wave or touch. Also you can use vibrations, e.g.: thump the table or stomp the floor. Sometimes use light switches flicking on/off. If familiar enough, you could toss something near their line of vision (Deaf people have excellent peripheral vision).

- Do face the person throughout, keeping your face clear, with enough light.
- Ask the Deaf person how they prefer to communicate ("do you sign, lip-read, talk, or write?"). Whichever method you use, make sure the Deaf person is comfortable
- Do talk slowly, naturally and pleasantly. Do not shout (it can create tension and distorts lip patterns).

- Explain clearly what is happening or what is going to happen, so the Deaf person is not left out or left guessing.
- Do watch for indications of understanding (nods at appropriate moments, a negative shaking of the head, a questioning look, or a slight frown).
- Do rephrase your message if at first you are not understood. Remember to establish the topic before the comment or question. Give visual clues. Keep messages short, do not waffle.
- Do give the Deaf person time to answer.
- Do not hesitate to ask a Deaf person to slow down (“slow please”) or repeat (“again please”) with his/her message.
- Do not pretend to understand.

Related Information Sheets

- Access
- Communicating with people who are Deaf or hard of hearing
- Providing an Auslan Interpreter – Your Responsibilities Working with an Auslan (Sign Language) Interpreter

For more information speak to an expert at:



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