

# Ten Misconceptions about People with Hearing Loss

This article was written originally at the request of a corporation that wanted to use it as a training tool for its staff. An informal survey of people with hearing loss quickly revealed that there were many misconceptions that were particularly upsetting and frustrating. This issue became the topic of conversation at meetings across the country. While this list says “Ten Misconceptions,” there are many more. This is just a starting point for a conversation.

## 1. Everyone with a hearing loss uses sign language and reads lips.

Hearing loss is a spectrum, and people with hearing loss don't all communicate the same way. How a person communicates depends on a variety of factors, such as the person's degree of hearing loss, whether a hearing aid or cochlear implant is used, the age the person lost his/her hearing, the level of auditory training received, and the nature of the listening situation. The majority of people with hearing loss do not use sign language, but it is still important to those whose communication depends on it.

American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual language with its own syntax and grammar that is quite different from spoken/written English language. For example, instead of saying, "There goes the blue car," ASL would sign, "Car blue go." Not all sign language is the same. It varies by country just as the spoken language varies. A person with some knowledge of sign language is not a substitute for a qualified interpreter who is trained to transmit what is said clearly and accurately. All interpreters should be certified.

Some people with hearing loss read lips and others do not. Lip reading (also called “speech reading”) is most helpful as a supplement to residual hearing, since many speech sounds are not visible on the lips. It does help to face the person with hearing loss. Many people can pick up visual clues even if they are not proficient at lip reading.

## 2. Increasing the sound volume will enable a person with hearing loss to understand what is said.

Increasing the volume is only part of the solution; clarity is also important. There is a point where increasing the volume begins to distort the quality of the sound. To obtain sufficient clarity, people with residual hearing may require sound to be transmitted from the microphone directly to their ear via an assistive listening system. Sitting close to the speaker can assist the listener (and facilitates lip reading) but is not a substitute for an assistive listening system. Yelling and over-articulating does not help, because they distort the natural rhythm of speech and make lip reading more difficult. A person who can hear normally cannot determine whether the sound is fine for a person with hearing loss.

### 3. Hearing aids and cochlear implants restore hearing to normal.

A person does not obtain “normal” hearing by wearing a hearing aid or cochlear implant. It is not the same as wearing glasses. Hearing aids increase the volume but do not significantly improve clarity or bring the sound closer to the person. They can slightly enhance clarity by raising the volume in certain frequencies. Communication with cochlear implants varies from almost normal hearing to only gaining environmental sounds and depends on such factors as the individual’s hearing history, length and onset of deafness, and age of implantation.

People with hearing loss may be able to understand and respond correctly many times by listening intently, but they can miss important information. It is also tiring to listen intently for a prolonged period.

### 4. People with hearing loss are dumb, stupid, mute, have intellectual limitations, and are unsuccessful.

People with hearing loss have the same range of intelligence as the general population without hearing loss. People with untreated, or inadequately treated, hearing loss may respond inappropriately since they may have not heard what was said. There are sometimes delays when the telephone relay system is being used due to the time needed for transcription. Those who are not familiar with relay service may assume that the additional time is because the person with the hearing loss is not intelligent.

Some people with hearing loss can speak and others cannot. A person who speaks well doesn’t necessarily hear well. It can be frustrating or upsetting to people with hearing loss when a person remarks on how well they speak. Speaking to the companion of the person with hearing loss, instead of directly to the person, reinforces this attitudinal discrimination.

People with hearing loss do have difficulty obtaining employment because of a misconception that they cannot do more than simple tasks. This attitude dates back to when remedies for hearing loss were few or nonexistent. A person with a hearing loss is fully employable but may need certain accommodations for effective communication, as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is always best to ask the person what type of accommodation is needed.

### 5. People with hearing loss are older adults.

Of the 36 million people with hearing loss, only 30% of the people that have some form of hearing loss are 65 or older.

6. People with hearing loss only spend time with other people with hearing loss.

Hearing loss can affect anyone and does not discriminate. People with hearing loss spend time with family or friends who may or may not have a hearing loss. They do not want to be relegated to special seats and want to sit with as many friends and family members as they wish just like everyone else.

7. Having a hearing loss is shameful.

This assumption explains why many people with hearing loss will not purchase or use hearing aids. According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, “only one out of five people who could benefit from a hearing aid actually wears one.”

8. When people with hearing loss miss something, it's OK to tell them “It's not important” or “I'll tell you later.”

It is frustrating to people with a hearing loss not to have something repeated when they miss part of the conversation. Saying “It wasn't important” compounds the frustration because now not only did they miss part of the conversation but the conversation is also being edited. The person with a hearing loss wants to decide for himself or herself what is important.

9. People with hearing loss are rude and pushy.

People with hearing loss may interrupt a conversation because they didn't hear the speaker and not because they are rude. People with hearing loss may position themselves toward the front of a group or in a room so that they are closer to the speaker, making it easier for them to hear and lip read. This is sometimes perceived as being pushy.

10. People with a hearing loss are defined by their hearing loss.

Hearing loss is a characteristic, like the color of one's eyes. It does not define the person. The “person” should be listed first, e.g. “person who is hard of hearing,” “person who is deaf,” or “person with hearing loss.” See [http://ebulletin.us/archive/2007/september/09\\_07\\_spitzer\\_signs\\_per\\_first\\_leg.php](http://ebulletin.us/archive/2007/september/09_07_spitzer_signs_per_first_leg.php)

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