

Module 1: Perceptions of Deafness: What is Deafness?

By the end of this module you will be able to:

- Understand the terminology used to describe different types and levels of deafness
- Recognise terminology that is no longer acceptable
- Identify potential clues that may indicate a hearing loss.

The aim of this module is to look at:

- Explaining the terminology (including drawing attention to some commonly used but unacceptable terms)
- Recognising deafness.

In normal hearing, sound is collected by the ear lobe and channelled down the ear canal until it reaches the auditory nerve. The nerve then transmits the sound signals to the brain.



In deafness, either the sound's journey is blocked or there is a break down with one or more of the ear's components. It is estimated that over nine million people in the UK have a hearing loss; that's approximately 1 in 7.

Descriptions of Types of Hearing Loss

There are many types of deafness and different degrees of hearing loss. Hearing problems can be caused by various factors, including:

- Viral or bacterial infections
- Excessive ear wax
- Illness
- The effects of certain drugs
- Exposure to excessive or prolonged noise
- Hereditary factors.

Types of deafness can be broadly classed into two categories: **conductive** and **sensorineural**. Some people, however, may have a more complex hearing loss involving a mixture of both categories.

Conductive Loss

In conductive deafness, a problem in the middle or outer ear blocks the sound's passage. The sounds heard are essentially intact but are muffled. The greater the degree of deafness, the quieter the sounds may be to the person. A common temporary form of conductive deafness occurs when suffering from a cold, during which sounds seem distant or quieter than usual. Conductive deafness can

sometimes be treated by medicine or surgery, and a hearing aid may be of some help.

Sensorineural Loss

Also known as **perceptive** or **nerve deafness**, sensorineural deafness is due to a problem with the workings of the inner ear or cochlea, which affects the signals the auditory nerve sends to the brain. It is therefore not the passage of sound that is affected but the ear's ability to process it. The sounds heard may seem not just quieter but also distorted, with some sounds being more difficult to hear than others. The greater the severity of deafness, the more distorted the sounds can become. Hearing aids cannot fully correct these problems, but they may be able to improve them slightly. Sensorineural loss cannot usually be treated.

A common form of sensorineural loss is **presbycusis, otherwise known as age-related deafness** (becoming deaf as you get older). It affects the middle ear and the auditory nerve. The ability to hear higher frequencies (such as the sound of a telephone ringing) is usually affected first. The chance of having a hearing impairment increases sharply with age. Approximately one third of people between the ages of 60 and 70 has a hearing impairment. Of those who are over 70, approximately three quarters have a hearing impairment.

Tinnitus

Approximately 10% of adults have at some time experienced tinnitus (noises in the ear) for longer than 5 minutes. The noise can be intermittent or constant and is usually a ringing, buzzing, or hissing sound. The volume of this sound can be variable, and those suffering with a louder tinnitus will find it more intrusive. It can affect people with otherwise normal hearing. Some hearing-aid users may find their aid masks the tinnitus sounds. Some causes of tinnitus, such as excessive ear wax or infections, can be treated. However, it is not always possible to find the cause. Tinnitus can be sporadic, and sometimes it can go completely without treatment.

Acceptable Terminology

Some terminology used for defining Deaf people is generally more acceptable than others. However, the terminology considered acceptable really depends on the individual preference of the Deaf person concerned. This is also true of the cultural background of each individual. The most commonly used terms are discussed below.

'Hard of Hearing'

The term **hard of hearing** is used to describe a person who has mild to moderate hearing loss and who still has some useful hearing, possibly boosted with hearing aid(s). There are a large number of older people that can be described thus. Hard of hearing people are usually able to express themselves using speech, and are most likely to identify with hearing people and culture. Each person is different, however, so the characteristics outline below are just a general guideline and cannot be applied to everyone.

A person who is hard of hearing:

- May hide or not notice deafness and be reluctant to admit to communication difficulties; often people do not recognise the person has any special needs
- May feel embarrassed at having to ask people to repeat things and or wear/use a hearing aid
- May avoid noisy/busy situations, as these can be difficult and uncomfortable and often make hearing more of a problem than in quieter situations (this also makes other people think that the person can hear when he or she wants to)
- May feel that a hearing aid can be uncomfortable, or even painful, and fiddly
- May need to ask for information to be repeated (sometimes more than once!); spoken information, especially instructions, can be easily misunderstood
- May feel frustrated if he or she is only picking up parts of a conversation, especially if people don't bother to include him or her; life can be isolating if there are communication difficulties
- May find other people's attitudes difficult to tolerate: relationships with family and friends can be a little strained if information needs repeating all the time.

'Deafened'

The term **deafened** describes those who have lost a significant amount of hearing (severe to profound loss) **as adults**. Having been hearing for a number of years, they have acquired spoken language as hearing people, so although they may have little or no useful hearing, they will have speech and knowledge of spoken English. Most therefore identify themselves mainly with hearing people and culture. They may feel:

- Anxious, angry and/or frustrated at their loss of hearing and at no longer being able to do some of the things they did when they were hearing
- Isolated as communication becomes more difficult (e.g. Lip-reading)
- Unwilling to draw attention to communication difficulties
- Anxious about losing their jobs, along with the associated financial implications
- Distressed about the change in relationships with others, which can become strained as their families and friends also have to adjust to different communication methods
- Concerned about the need to develop new communication strategies: for example, they will need be assertive when asking people to remove barriers which affect lip-reading, and spoken information/instructions are likely to get misunderstood
- Frustrated that their access to information is restricted if it is aurally presented
- Discriminated against at work, in training, and in leisure pursuits
- Upset that they may need additional equipment to assist with daily living.

'Profoundly Deaf'

The term **profoundly deaf** describes those with a significant hearing loss (severe to profound) from birth or in childhood. This hearing loss generally occurs before they have acquired speech. They may have no useful hearing and may or may not use speech or hearing aid(s). The first or preferred language of these individuals is often British Sign Language, which bears little resemblance to spoken English. They may not easily identify themselves with hearing people. They have grown up with their deafness, and can accept it more naturally. They are therefore likely to identify themselves as being members of the Deaf community with their own (Deaf) culture.

They may find that they are confronted with some or all of the following problems:

- Communication is a strain when mixing with hearing people: spoken information, especially instructions, can be easily misunderstood
- Other people's attitudes are difficult to deal with, as there are often problems with getting hearing people to understand their communication needs.
- Spoken English is confusing (BSL is not the same as spoken English – see **Module 3**)
- Access to information is limited, as many outlets are based on written English with no BSL translation
- It is difficult to assert their Deaf identity, as hearing people can try to 'make the Deaf person into a hearing person'
- They are discriminated against at work, in training, and in leisure pursuits.
- Relationships with hearing people can be awkward if their first language is BSL and the hearing person cannot sign
- Life can be isolated if they have no links to the Deaf community and Deaf culture.

Additional Note:

Capitalisation: 'Big D and Little d'

Reference will be made to the term 'deaf' using a capital D. This has become widely used to distinguish between the cultural identity of deaf people and the condition of deafness.

Deaf refers to people with a cultural identity that is different to hearing people, and deaf refers only to the condition of deafness.
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More information on cultural identity is covered in **Module 6**.

Generally Unacceptable Terms

The following terms are, to a varying extent, less acceptable, but remember that it is down to the individual's preference.

Module 1 – Perceptions of deafness: What is deafness?

Activity 1

Explain what degree of hearing loss (mild, moderate, severe, or profound) a person would have if he or she was described as.

'hard of hearing'

'deafened'

'profoundly deaf'

Activity 2

Make a list of the activities and events in your life where the ability to hear has been important to the activity. What sounds would you have missed if you had:

1. A mild hearing loss?

2. A moderate hearing loss?

3. Severe hearing loss?

4. Profound hearing loss?

Activity 3

You have become deafened overnight. You can hear isolated sounds, but nothing you can make sense of. Which activities will you find more difficult (but can still do)? Which activities might you have to consider stopping (because, for example, they are too difficult or dangerous)? You will need to refer to this list in other modules.

Activities that I could do with difficulty	Activities I may have to give up

Activity 4

From the following descriptions, are these people hard of hearing, deafened, or profoundly deaf?

- 1. Mary is 82 years old. Her family complain that her TV is getting a bit loud. Recently, she has found it a little difficult following what people say to her, particularly her daughter Sarah, whom she says speaks very quietly. She tells her to speak up and her daughter gets tired of always having to shout and repeat herself. Sarah gets embarrassed when taking Mary to church because Mary speaks loudly through the sermon and prayers.*

Answer _____

- 2. Paul is 45 years old. He's worked in the factory since he left school. He used to enjoy chatting to friends in the pub or the football match, but now he doesn't bother going out because he's embarrassed that he can't hear the jokes and stories they tell. His friends don't talk to him so much now, because when they ask him questions, he says odd things or doesn't answer them at all. They think he's getting moody in his old age!*

Answer _____

3. *James is 23 years old. His speech sounds a little slurred, but it's easy to understand once you get used to it. His friends have noticed he moves his head a little closer to them when they speak to him. They think that he's generally nice, but he can get a bit moody sometimes when he hasn't understood them and he often looks tired.*

Answer _____

4. *Beth is 4 years old. She doesn't respond to her parents talking to her. She's begun using gestures to let people know what she wants. Her parents are concerned that she is not speaking at all yet.*

Answer _____

Now ask your Tutor/mentor to check this section and provide feedback. You should both sign below; when you agree that the results of your activities meet the required standard.

Tutor/mentor Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Student Signature: _____ **Date:** _____