

IMAGINE YOURSELF . . . A DEAF PERSON

Imagine that you walk into a community centre for a community information night about the impending bushfires. The room is full of people speaking a foreign language. You only know a little of this language, but they are speaking so quickly and fluently that you have no idea what they are saying. They look at you and ask you a question but you don't know what the question is. You only know that they are standing there waiting for an answer. You indicate that you can't understand them and they sigh and brush you off, telling you not to worry about it.

What would need to happen for you to feel understood?

Communication tips: a deaf person

In general:

- Remember, emotions are like gatekeepers for information. The person won't hear your message unless they feel safe and can trust you.
- Be aware that trauma can sit behind apparently irrational or disengaged behaviour.
- Ensure a quiet, calm environment where possible to minimise stress.
- Try to assess the person's communication needs at the outset and adjust your communication style accordingly.
- Check if the person needs a support person or companion with them.
- Speak to the person not their companion.
- Speak normally. Don't exaggerate your speech or movements.
- Introduce yourself by name.
- Address the person by name
- Be patient and give your undivided attention.
- Listen carefully and avoid assuming too much.
- Don't patronise or talk down to the person.
- Inform the person of what you are about to do; say why; and say what you need them to do for you.
- Stop and check comprehension from time to time.
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person to do or say something.
- Relax. Anyone can make mistakes. Offer an apology if you feel you've caused embarrassment. Keep a sense of humour and be willing to communicate.

Specifically:

- Some deaf people use Auslan (Australian Sign Language). If Auslan is the preferred language, arrange for an Auslan Interpreter to be present.
- Use a visual signal to gain the person's attention before you start speaking, eg. wave or tap their shoulder.
- Face the person directly and maintain eye contact.
- Make sure your mouth is visible. Remember not to cover your mouth with your hand or any other object as you talk.
- Speak evenly, not too fast or slow.
- Don't exaggerate your mouth movements, as this will make it more difficult to lip-read.
- Use short sentences.