

'ARE YOU ALRIGHT WITH THAT?'



JUSTINE SHARES HOW IT IS OFTEN
THE ATTITUDE OF HEARING
PEOPLE TOWARDS DEAFNESS WHICH
CAUSES THE BIGGEST BARRIERS



AUTHOR
Justine Lee

Justine is a marketing and communications specialist working in the sport and travel sector. She is a keen runner, climber and outdoor swimmer and has been deaf since childhood.

I remember the excitement of packing my rucksack for the first time – bright orange with an external frame – and wondering how I was going to carry this weight for two days. I was 14 and about to head across Bowes Moor with a group of classmates on our Duke of Edinburgh's Award expedition. This was my first outdoor adventure. For my untested legs, the expedition was hard, that external frame was not comfortable, and the canvas A-frame tent was heavy, but I loved it. Navigating our way on our own, setting up camp...I had been bitten by the adventure bug. Since then, I have been fortunate to enjoy many, many days hiking, climbing, camping, canoeing, cycling, skiing and sailing in many different countries and continents.

I love being outdoors, trying something new, pushing myself and seeing what I can achieve.

This may not sound particularly remarkable in a magazine dedicated to people working in the Outdoors. However, it took some confidence on the part of my parents when I was 14 to let me sign up for the DofE. Without their confidence, my life would have been very different, and I would not have had the chance to enjoy the thrill of scrambling to a mountain top or sailing the oceans.

Why?

I am deaf. I wear hearing aids but without these I hear very little.

Unlike other disabilities, deafness is not immediately obvious. All limbs are intact, there is no visible indicator. Most research and training around supporting people with disabilities centres on how to accommodate people with physical or learning disabilities.

As I discovered when writing my own degree thesis, there is very limited research into the impact of hearing loss on participation in outdoor activities. After all, what is there to consider? A hearing loss doesn't affect your actual ability to climb, run or ride. You don't need to make adaptations to kit or activity choices. Yet, while someone who is deaf may be physically capable of taking part in all activities, there are significant barriers that prevent people with a hearing loss from taking part.

So, what are these challenges and how can you navigate your way through and ensure your colleague or group member enjoys their experience?

Find out how best to communicate

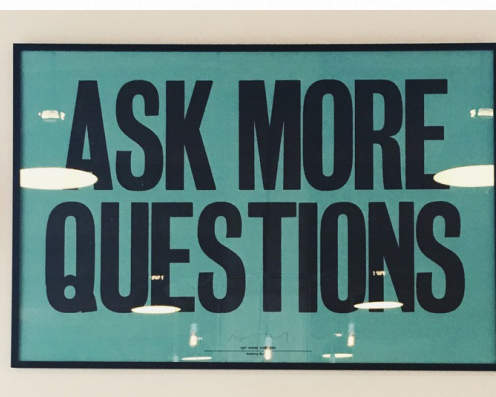
The biggest challenge when leading a group that has a deaf/hard-of-hearing member is, obviously, communication. Poor communication can lead to anxiety, frustration and embarrassment.

As with any other disability, people with a hearing loss are not a homogenous group experiencing the same barriers and difficulties.

It is very rare for someone to be completely deaf, there is a sliding scale ranging from having some hearing loss to being profoundly deaf, and levels of hearing can differ between each ear. Some people may wear hearing aids, some may have cochlear implants, others may use sign language to communicate.

When a climbing instructor saw that I had put 'partially deaf' on my personal details form, he asked if I'm 'alright with that?'

Well, strangely, I am.



The question should have been 'what did he need to know or do to make sure we had a successful day out?'

What can you do?

People with a hearing loss are naturally anxious that they know what's going on. They don't want to do the wrong thing or go the wrong way.

In one of my first fell races, the weather was so abysmal it washed all the course markings away. Positioned at the back of the group (because I didn't want to hold up the faster runners), I didn't hear the new instructions.

I had indicated my hearing loss on my entry form, but these forms were administered by someone else in the hosting club. The tale of me doing a completely different route and my teammates frantically searching for me after they had finished is now a good dinner-party tale. At the time, we were all worried and in future races a teammate made sure they were by my side.

My advice:

Take note of what has been put on personal detail forms from – and talk to – the individual(s) involved.

Move to a quiet area and ask how they like to communicate and what their needs are – don't assume.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. How much can they hear? What are the best methods of communication for that person? Do they lip read or have an interpreter?

Where will you be?

Think about the nature of the activity that you will be taking part in/leading. Will you always be in a position where you will be able to face the group

ENJOYING NATURE AND THE OUTDOORS WITH DEAF CHILDREN

Get some tips from the National Deaf Children's Society on how to keep deaf children safe outdoors.

Click [here](#) to read more.





easily, or might you be out of sight at times or have your back to the group? Having your back to the group makes communication virtually impossible. How will you adjust your usual way of leading to compensate for this?

My advice:

Are there visual methods that you can use for teaching or leading? Ideas could include pre-agreeing a system of hand signals or signals using equipment (e.g. three sharp tugs on the rope), introducing a buddy system or making sure you only give instructions or directions when everyone is facing you.

When you need to talk to the group, try to minimise background noise, use quieter areas and consider noise from weather conditions such as wind.

Most emergency procedures also involve whistles and/or radios,

neither of which will work well for people who are deaf/have a hearing loss.

My advice:

Think about how you will alert the individual or group should an emergency arise – it could be a buddy system or using lights.

Have you got the right attitude?

One of the greatest challenges comes not from the individual who is deaf/has a hearing loss, but from those around them.

It is often the attitudes of hearing people that present the biggest barrier – the attitude that being deaf, despite the lack of any other limitation, somehow reduces or hinders their ability to perform well. Or that having a deaf person within the group/ taking part in the activity is too big a risk for the wider group. They are viewed as a burden or hindrance.

My advice:

Check your own perceptions, don't make assumptions.

If you have introduced a buddy system, make sure buddies don't take over.

As with any other group member, talk to the individual about their experience levels and how comfortable they are doing a particular activity.

Look out for isolation and loneliness

When investigating hearing loss and the impact on sporting performance for my degree thesis I found that, in common with my own experience, people who are deaf or who have a hearing loss are less likely to take part in team sports. This is primarily due to the challenge of interacting with others around you, the inability to hear shouts or commands from teammates or the ref's whistle.

Within outdoor activities, the individual with a hearing loss may find themselves on the periphery of the group, unable to take part in chat going on around them or tired from maintaining the high levels of awareness and concentration needed when in a group or doing an activity. This can lead to feelings of isolation which can impact on their enjoyment.

While a buddy system can be useful when taking part in an activity, it could lead to a sense of dependency which could be frustrating for the individual.

My advice:

Be aware of what is happening in your group.

Use regular pauses to give everyone the chance to chat easily and feel part of the group.

Think about kit, location and hazards

There are a few other areas to be aware of. Occasionally, some helmets may not be compatible with some hearing aids or cochlear implants. Wearing hoods/hats can affect the performance of hearing aids and cochlear transplants – either muffling microphones or adding background noise (rustling of a hood) which will make it more difficult to hear.



Hearing aids and cochlear transplants (the external mechanisms) aren't waterproof and will be removed before any water-based activity. As well as needing a safe space to keep these items, someone who was able to follow instructions and conversations on land may struggle now they are in or on the water. Make sure you address this in advance.

My advice:
Give your instructions whilst on land and agree some simple hand signals to use in the water.

When out on a trail, climbing a route or riding, if another group or individual comes up behind you, someone with a hearing loss won't be aware. The other hiker/ cyclist/ climber may be frustrated that they can't get past. The sudden appearance at your elbow of someone trying to squeeze past can be unnerving.

My advice:
Think about how you would handle this situation. Could you warn the people approaching from behind or have someone tap the deaf person on the shoulder to make them aware?

Don't be put off

It may feel like there is a lot to consider but do remember, the individual with the hearing loss will often have years of experience adapting what they do. They will be experienced in making sure they stand in the 'right' place to hear; letting the group or key individuals know about their hearing loss; bringing a buddy or an interpreter.

Far from being an 'extra thing to think about', implementing these tips and advice will improve the experience for any group whilst making sure all members have an enjoyable time and can achieve their potential ■

IMAGES
Article images have been sourced from pxhere.com, with the author's bio image supplied by the author. Photographers retain copyright.

TOP TIPS IN COMMUNICATION

- 1 Face the individual when speaking
- 2 Avoid having your face in shadow; this makes lip reading difficult
- 3 Speak clearly. Don't over exaggerate lip movements or speak excessively slowly
- 4 In your initial conversation, ask the individual where they would like to stand when you are giving instructions
- 5 Get their attention before you start speaking
- 6 If others in the group answer questions or put forward suggestions, repeat the answer/ question so the individual with the hearing loss is aware of what others have contributed
- 7 Check for understanding
- 8 Try rephrasing a sentence or instruction if it is not understood. Don't get frustrated if you have to repeat something several times

WHAT'S IT LIKE BEING DEAF OUTDOORS?

Sachiko Flores shares her perspective of what it means to be Deaf in the Outdoors.

Click *here* to watch



INTELLIGENT BODIES

Explore ideas of physical intelligence in Outdoor Learning go to page 27.