

By Denise Johnson, Project Coordinator for AODA Services for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing

“What Did You Say?”

A thought for you—do you know if the communication needs of someone who is culturally Deaf are the same as someone who is hard of hearing?

While I was growing up as a hard of hearing person, I struggled with my identity and I did not understand people. I felt I did not fit in anywhere in this world because I could not hear or understand what people were saying around me, especially in a group of people. I did not fit in among hearing people and I did not fit in in the Deaf community. I felt so alone.

Yeah, sometimes I was able to hear well but other times I did not hear well with my hearing aids. I could sign but I only knew to sign in English and not in American Sign Language (ASL). I could read lips but not 100 percent of the time. If you sit back and study people around you, you’ll notice that everyone’s lips are different. Some have big, little, small, bright red lips, some have moustaches, some hardly move their lips at all or some of them move their lips like a train. So now you may understand why people who are hard of hearing or Deaf may not like it when a person who can hear says, “Can you read my lips?” Reading lips, which only a small percentage of people who are Deaf and hard of hearing can do, is often frustrating.

A person who is hard of hearing or a person with hearing loss may nod and act like he or she understands everything. Some individuals do understand everything well. But many nod even when they don’t hear or understand. Others may rely on some other type of communication method.

How complicated can that be? People who are hard of hearing may chose to write back and forth, to use an oral interpreter or maybe use Communication Access to Real Time (CART). They may rely on reading lips alone or use an FM system that enables them to tune down the background noises.

How can you solve this dilemma? The best answer is to ask each individual who is Deaf or hard of hearing what the best way to communicate with him or her is before you meet. If that isn’t possible, you may need to arrange a time to meet again to provide accurate communication for the individual with hearing loss.