Deaf Culture Note # 12

**Deaf, Hard-of-hearing , Hearing-Impaired, Handicap, Deaf-Mute, Deaf and Dumb**

**…which one is right?**

Countless labels involving race or gender are widely known and deemed to be distasteful, insulting, or just politically incorrect. Many in the **Deaf** community have fought tirelessly over the years to change the terminology used to describe individuals with varying levels of hearing.

Deaf and Dumb

A relic from the medieval English era, this is the granddaddy of all negative labels pinned on deaf and hard of hearing people.  The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, pronounced us “deaf and dumb,” because he felt that deaf people were incapable of being taught, of learning, and of reasoned thinking.

Deaf-Mute

Another offensive term from the 18th-19th century, “mute” also means silent and without voice.  This label is technically inaccurate, since deaf and hard of hearing people generally have functioning vocal chords.

Handicap

Handicap is any physical or mental defect, congenital or acquired, preventing or restricting a person from participating in normal life or limiting their capacity to work. This label again emphasizes what a deaf person cannot do. Think…does a person’s hearing ability prevent or restrict them from participating in normal life?

Hearing-Impaired

This term was at one time preferred, largely because it was viewed as politically correct.  To declare oneself or another person as deaf or blind, for example, was considered somewhat bold, rude, or impolite.  At that time, it was thought better to use the word “impaired” along with “visually,” “hearing,” “mobility,” and so on.  “Hearing-impaired” was a well-meaning term that is not accepted or used by many deaf and hard of hearing people. It establishes the standard as “hearing” and anything different as “impaired,” or substandard, hindered, or damaged.  It implies that something is not as it should be and ought to be fixed if possible. Today the term “hearing-impaired” is viewed as negative.  The term focuses on what people can’t do.

Hard-of-Hearing or Deaf

For many people, the words “deaf” and “hard of hearing” are not negative. Politicians used to think the word "Deaf" was not Politically Correct.   Politicians preferred the term "hearing impaired," but the Deaf community **loves** the word "Deaf." You could say it is "CC" --culturally correct. You may find some individuals with mild hearing losses still referring to themselves as “Deaf” because they are not ashamed or embarrassed to have a hearing loss.

Words and labels can have a profound effect on people.  Show your respect for people by refusing to use outdated or offensive terms.  When in doubt, ask the individual how they identify themselves.

*< www.nad.org & signlanguageco.com >*

Videos to watch:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cj_mkG45KWQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5W604uSkrk>