

"What is Wrong With the Use of The Terms: 'Deaf-mute', 'Deaf and dumb', or 'Hearing-impaired'?" by Nancy Creighton, Pub. Coordinator Nat'l Assoc. of the Deaf

Deaf and hard of hearing people have the right to choose what they wish to be called, either as a group or on an individual basis. Overwhelmingly, deaf and hard of hearing people prefer to be called "deaf" or "hard of hearing". Nearly all organizations of the deaf use the term "deaf and hard of hearing", and the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) is no exception. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) voted in 1991 to use "deaf and hard of hearing" as an official designation.

Yet there are many people who persist in using terms other than "deaf" and "hard of hearing". The alternative terms are often seen in print, heard on radio and television, and picked up in casual conversations all over. Let us take a look at the three most-used alternative terms used today:

Hearing-Impaired-- A term much preferred by hearing people, largely because they view it as politically correct. In the mainstream society, to baldly state one's disability (e.g., deaf, blind, etc.) is somewhat rude and impolite. To their way of thinking, it is far better to soften the harsh reality by using the word "impaired" along with "visual", "hearing", and so on. "Hearing-impaired" is a well-meaning word that is much resented by deaf and hard of hearing people. Deaf and hard of hearing people feel that the words "deaf" and "hard of hearing" are not negative in any way at all. Indeed, the deaf and hard of hearing community views "hearing-impaired" as negative, because the label focuses on what's wrong with them. With this label, a standard has been set: the "hearing" standard. To be anything other than "hearing" is not acceptable to the mainstream society, and deaf & hard of hearing people have failed to meet the "standard". To be fair, this is probably what hearing people did not intend to convey to deaf and hard of hearing people every time they use "hearing impaired" as a label. Deaf and hard of hearing people believe that there is nothing wrong with them, and that their culture, language, and community are just as fulfilling as the ones experienced by the mainstream society.

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. To his way of thinking, if a person could not use his/her voice in the same way as a hearing person, then there was no way that this person could develop cognitive abilities. (Source: Deaf Heritage, by Jack Gannon, 1980)

In later years, "dumb" came to mean "silent". This definition still persists, because that is how people see deaf people. The term is offensive to deaf and hard of hearing people for a number of reasons. One, deaf and hard of hearing people is by no means "silent" at all. They use sign language, lip-reading, vocalizations, and so on to communicate. Communication is not reserved for hearing people alone, and using one's voice is not the only way to communicate. Two, "dumb" also has a second meaning: stupid. Deaf and hard of hearing people have encountered plenty of people who subscribe to the philosophy that if you cannot use your voice well, you don't have much else "upstairs", and have nothing going for you. Obviously, this is incorrect, ill informed, and false. Deaf and hard of hearing people have repeatedly proved that they have much to contribute to the society at large.

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. The problem lies with the fact that to successfully modulate your voice, you need to be able to hear your own voice. Again, because deaf and hard of hearing people use various methods of communication other than using their voices, they are not truly mute. True communication occurs when others understand one persons' message, and they can respond in kind.

What's in a name? Plenty! Words and labels can have a profound effect on people. Deaf and hard of hearing people are sensitive as to how they are referred to, because they have experienced being put down and disparaged by other people. They have seen their intelligence, their abilities, and their skills questioned simply because they are deaf or hard of hearing. Show your respect for deaf and hard of hearing people by refusing to use those outdated and offensive terms.