



DeafHear.ie

Services for Deaf & Hard of Hearing People

See our leaflet for our Resource Centres
and Outreach Centres

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Why is it wrong to use these terms?

Deaf and Dumb
Deaf-Mute
Hearing Impaired

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 organisations of Deaf people use these terms and DeafHear 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 other terms. The alternative terms are often seen in print, heard on radio and television and picked up in casual conversations all over. Let’s take a look at three of the most common alternative terms.

What is wrong with the use of these terms?

Deaf and Dumb

A relic from the medieval English era, this is the gran-daddy of all negative labels pinned on Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, pronounced us “deaf and dumb” because he thought 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 hearing people, then there was no way that this person could develop cognitive abilities (Deaf Heritage, 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 people for a number of reasons. One, Deaf people are by

no means “silent” at all. They use sign language, lip-reading, vocalisations, 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 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 people use various methods of communication other than using their voices, they are not truly mute. True communication occurs when others understand one’s message and they can respond in kind.

Hearing-impaired

A term much preferred by hearing people, largely because they view it as politically correct. In the mainstream society, to state boldly 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 hard reality by using the word ‘impaired’ along with ‘visual’, ‘hearing’ and so on. ‘Hearing impaired’ is a well-meaning word that is much resented.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing people feel that the words ‘Deaf’ and ‘Hard of Hearing’ are not negative in any way at all. Indeed, they view

'hearing-impaired' as negative, because the label focuses on what they can't do. With this label, a standard has been set: the 'hearing' standard. To be anything other than 'hearing' is not acceptable to mainstream society, and Deaf and Hard of Hearing people have failed to meet the 'standard'.

To be fair, this is probably what hearing people do not intend to convey every time they use 'hearing impaired' as a label.

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, 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 of their hearing loss. Show your respect for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people by refusing to use those outdated and offensive terms.