



# CONSIDERATIONS WHEN PROVIDING MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID TO A DEAF PERSON: MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID GUIDELINES FOR DEAF FIRST AIDERS

## INTRODUCTION TO THESE GUIDELINES



### **FIND THE AUSLAN TRANSLATION OF THIS SECTION HERE:**

<https://vimeo.com/451329924/34fd2d6198>

These guidelines are for adults who identify as *Deaf* and wish to offer mental health first aid to other people who identify as Deaf. There are companion guidelines for adults who are hearing who wish to offer mental health first aid to someone who identifies as Deaf. The term 'Deaf person' is used in these guidelines to refer to a person with a hearing loss, who identifies as culturally Deaf and uses sign language. The *Deaf community* includes both deaf and hearing people who use sign language and identify with *Deaf culture*. The role of the first aider is to assist the person until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis resolves. These guidelines are a general set of recommendations. Each individual is unique and it is important to tailor your support to that person's needs and abilities. These guidelines have been developed as part of suite of guidelines about how to best assist a person with mental health problems. These guidelines should be used in conjunction with existing mental health first aid guidelines that are available on the Mental Health First Aid Australia website ([mhfa.com.au](http://mhfa.com.au)).

A mental health problem is when there is a major change in a person's normal way of thinking, feeling or behaving. It affects the person's ability to get on with life. It does not go away quickly or lasts longer than normal emotions or reactions would be expected to. It might involve a diagnosed mental illness, a worsening of mental health or an undiagnosed problem, or a drug or alcohol problem.

Each country has its own *natural sign language* with distinct linguistic features and rules and vocabulary. However, people who identify as Deaf may have varying levels of fluency in a natural sign language and may have complex communication needs requiring additional communication strategies, e.g. gestures, simple key words, drawings and visual aids. Communication accessibility is critical for effectively offering mental health first aid. In these guidelines, when we make statements such as "talk to the person", "ask the person", "explain to the person", this is to be done based on the person's communication preferences. For more information see the section on communicating with the person.

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**TERMS USED IN THESE GUIDELINES**

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TERM	DEFINITION
<b>deaf or Deaf</b>	The term deaf is used to refer to all individuals who experience any level of hearing loss regardless of their cultural and communication preferences. The term Deaf is specifically used to refer to individuals who identify with the Deaf community and Deaf culture.
<b>Deaf community</b>	The Deaf community includes people from many diverse backgrounds. This community does not have a specific geographic location. It encompasses a range of sub-groups including but not limited to, hearing children of Deaf adults (CODAs), hearing or Deaf parents of Deaf children, people who are Deafblind, First Nations people who are also Deaf, Deaf people who are refugees and people who are hard of hearing beginning to learn the language and participate in the community.
<b>Deaf culture</b>	Deaf culture is the set of social beliefs, behaviours, art, literary traditions, history, values and language that are influenced by deafness and unite people who identify as Deaf.
<b>Natural sign language</b>	Natural sign languages are full, complex languages with their own grammar, lexicon and dialects. They are passed down from one deaf generation to the next and used by Deaf communities around the world.
<b>Non-conventional sign language /communication</b>	Non-conventional sign language or communication refers to visual methods of communication that are idiosyncratic. They do not meet the definition of a natural sign language. Examples of non-conventional sign languages may include signs developed in the home, International Sign, tactile signing, key word sign or Makaton and Signed English.
<b>Deaf interpreter</b>	A Deaf interpreter is an individual who is deaf, fluent in sign language, written English, non-conventional communication and may have additional familiarity with a foreign sign language. A Deaf interpreter will work in tandem with a spoken language – sign language interpreter, providing a unique language or communication bridge for deaf individuals whose communication mode cannot be adequately accessed by a spoken language – sign language interpreter.
<b>Spoken language – sign language interpreter</b>	A spoken language – sign language interpreter is usually hearing and fluent in sign language and a spoken language. They transmit messages in sign language and spoken language between a party that uses sign language and a party that uses spoken language.
<b>Foreign sign language</b>	This refers to a natural sign language from a country outside of the current country of residence. For example, if a Deaf person migrates from the United States of America to Australia and uses American Sign Language. American Sign Language would be considered a foreign sign language in Australia.





## **PARTICULAR CHALLENGES AFFECTING DEAF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS**



**FIND THE AUSLAN TRANSLATION OF THIS SECTION HERE:**

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### **Developing Social and Emotional Skills**

If you are helping a Deaf person, it is important that you have some understanding of Deaf culture, as any assumptions about deafness may impact on you being able to develop trust and a helping relationship with the person you are helping.

### **Developing Peer Networks During Adolescence**

For people who are Deaf, adolescence is a period where developing peer networks is very difficult and developing a cultural identity takes time. You should not make assumptions about the person's Deaf identity. Deaf people often grow up without a Deaf role model and this may affect the development of their social and emotional skills. The limitations Deaf people may experience during adolescence can contribute to barriers in establishing peer networks and accessing services and supports, e.g. transport, location of activities, money.

### **Communication Problems with Family and Peers**

Deaf people often have relatives and peers who are not members of or involved in the Deaf community. Therefore, you should not make any assumptions about the person's relationship with their family members, e.g. assuming family members have knowledge about or understand what is really happening for the person or that the person has shared their feelings or experiences with them. The person's family or friends may be an unreliable source of information about the person because of their own limited communication or individual bias about the person, deafness or Deaf culture. You should prioritise the person's experience and version of events.

### **Challenges in Recognising Mental Health Problems**

A Deaf person may be reluctant to acknowledge they have a mental health problem because:

- They may have lived with challenging health issues for a long time and it has become the 'norm' for them
- Of their educational background and experiences
- Some people in the Deaf community may hold stigmatising attitudes about people with mental illness
- They do not have the language skills to discuss their feelings or what they are experiencing.

### **Impact of the Nature of the Deaf Community**

The nature of the Deaf community may inform how a Deaf person experiences a mental health problem or crisis, and accessing help. Due to the size of the community and existing or previous relationships with other people connected to Deaf community, Deaf people may be reluctant to share their story in full. Their freedom to seek help may be restricted by the lack of anonymity within the Deaf community.



### **Limitations of Information and Resources**

There is a lack of information and resources about the mental health problems faced by the Deaf community, in language or format that is accessible to Deaf people (sign language, video with captions, picture).

## **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPECIFIC MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS**



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There are guidelines for how to offer mental health first aid if a person is experiencing a specific mental health problem. These can be found on the Mental Health First Aid Australia website ([mhfa.com.au](http://mhfa.com.au)). The following is additional information that is specific to people who are Deaf and experiencing a mental health problem.

### **Suicide**

Risk factors for suicide include: mental illness, poor physical health and disabilities, attempted suicide or past self-harm, had bad things happen recently particularly with relationships or their health, been physically or sexually abused as a child and recently exposed to suicide by someone else. The following may be additional suicide risk factors for Deaf people:

- Loss of places with social connection e.g. closing of Deaf schools, Deaf clubs
- Communication barriers
- Under- and unemployment
- Recently being a victim to scams
- Loss of people who the person is dependent on for communication.

You should be aware that the person may not understand the word, sign or concept of 'suicide'.

The person may believe suicide is the only option because they believe there are no services available or because they have not had success accessing services and support previously.

### **Non-suicidal Self Injury**

The following may be risk factors for non-suicidal self-injury that are specific to Deaf people:

- Isolation
- Communication barriers with family, partners and friends
- Use of substances
- Repeated rejection
- Lack or loss of identity
- Feeling like they don't belong
- Bullying.

You should be aware that the person may not understand the word, sign or concept of non-suicidal self-injury.



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### **Anxiety**

You should be aware that a Deaf person may have feelings of anxiety when entering new spaces and establishing communication with new people, because of the room design, environment and functionality of hearing technology.

### **Psychosis**

If a Deaf person has an odd belief, do not assume that this is necessarily due to psychosis. It could be the result of lack of education and access to information.

### **Substance use**

A Deaf person may not have knowledge about substances and risks to health of using substances, due to social isolation, educational limitations or prevention programs not being delivered in a linguistically and *culturally* accessible way.

Do not assume that a Deaf person's substance use is related to their deafness. A Deaf person may be using substances for the following reasons:

- To connect with people, as without this connection they may become socially isolated
- To manage feelings of frustration, anger and sadness that can result from interactions with the hearing world.

You should be aware that challenges in the process of the person finding a suitable health professional may reinforce their use of substances. The person's only supports might be within their current substance-using social group and finding another non-substance using social group might be difficult.

## **BULLYING**



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A Deaf person may feel powerless to stop bullying behaviour because they believe they are being bullied for a reason they cannot change, or believe they should accept the bullying behaviours because these behaviours have been normalised throughout their life. A Deaf person may have little experience of standing up for themselves. They may be experiencing distress based on false or misleading information given to them by the bully. Because of bullying, the person may be ashamed, shy or embarrassed about their use of sign language.

A Deaf person may be reluctant to report their experience of bullying because they think it is normal behaviour or due to past experiences of not being believed or getting in trouble. A Deaf person may themselves be a bully as a result of their own personal history with being bullied, not be aware that their own behaviour is inappropriate.

Listen to what the person says about their experience of bullying without stating any judgements to the person.

Due to the small size of the community, the person may continue to share social or professional spaces with the bully (e.g. continuing to share spaces with peers from school). They may also be concerned about their safety if the abuser/bully knows where they are, e.g.



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social event, school, workplace, shopping centre, sporting event. It is important to know that standard anti-bullying programs are not always accessible, relevant or comprehended by Deaf people.

### **Preparing to Offer Mental Health First Aid**



#### **FIND THE AUSLAN TRANSLATION OF THIS SECTION HERE:**

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Before helping a Deaf person, you should know different ways of explaining concepts and be familiar with a range of signs, related to:

- Suicide (e.g. Do you want to be dead? Do you want to kill yourself? Do you want your life to finish?)
- Non-suicidal self-injury
- Bullying.

Standard 'helping' programs are not always accessible, relevant or comprehended by Deaf people. It may be difficult to find a culturally and linguistically skilled mental health professional and you should be familiar with the local culturally and linguistically appropriate services in your area. However, be aware of the communication access and barriers when suggesting support groups, professional services, social and recreational groups to the person. You should know the difference between an unqualified interpreter and a qualified, professional interpreter.

### **COMMUNICATING WITH THE PERSON**



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When you are helping a deaf person, you should:

- Ask the person their preferred communicative approach and method at the initial contact with the person.
- Take the time to establish a good communication method, e.g. a specific ongoing method of communication.
- Reinforce communication by using tools, e.g. gestures, simple key words, drawings and visual aids.
- Adjust your communication based on the communication needs of the person, e.g. rephrase questions.
- Clarify with the person any signs that you are not clear on, e.g. hallucination, suicide, type of emotion.
- Stop the conversation and ask for clarification if you do not understand what the person is saying.
- Ask the person directly if you are not sure if there is effective communication, e.g. "can I just check in with you that we're on the same wavelength?"



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- Make it clear to the person you are helping why your attention needs to shift away, e.g. look something up on the phone for the person, getting them some water, knock at the door.
- Clearly explain to the person your intentions to act before undertaking that action, e.g. sending an SMS, making a phone call.

Try to move to a less (visually or auditorily) distracting location if necessary and feasible.

### **Do not make assumptions**

If you have knowledge of a person's 'language persona' (e.g. pace, tone, expressions, general demeanour, body language) you should use that knowledge to assess and determine if the person's communication skills are worse than usual. If something is different it might signal that the person is not well. If a person appears highly agitated and aggressive, you should not assume that the person is experiencing a mental health problem or paranoia. Rather, it could be their 'language persona', the result of past negative experiences or ongoing barriers with communication.

### **Working with interpreters**

If the person is feeling shy about their communication you should affirm and validate the Deaf person's preferred communication type and style. If they want an interpreter, let them know that they have the right to a qualified, professional interpreter they are comfortable with and trust, and not an unqualified or on-site interpreter.

When you are helping the person, you should be aware that they might find visual resources (e.g. pictures, sign language videos) helpful and a *Deaf interpreter* may be needed to assist with communication if the person is using non-conventional sign language or a foreign sign language.

### **Storytelling**

Within Deaf culture, narrative and story-telling is the preferred way of expressing oneself and it is important to allow the person time to share their story in full. If they are reluctant to share their story in full because of your relationships with other people involved, you should reassure the person about confidentiality and your ability to remain neutral.

### **Communicating when the person has experienced bullying**

If the person has experienced bullying, they may be more sensitive about your behaviour or communication. They may appreciate you being open and clear about your intentions and communication. Although touching to get the person's attention is a cultural norm within the community, in the context of bullying that involves physical abuse you should not assume that it is okay to touch the person to get their attention. Instead, use other means (e.g. hand waving, light flicking, table tapping) and be sensitive to cues from the person about the degree of touching that is appropriate. The following sorts of advice are not helpful for the person: "Just ignore them", "Just say hi", "This is normal kids/relationship stuff", "Just fight back".



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### **IF YOU ARE HAVING DIFFICULTY COMMUNICATING WITH THE PERSON, YOU SHOULD:**

- Avoid faking understanding
- Not dismiss what is being said as unimportant
- Be aware that lip reading causes fatigue for the person and is inadequate communication
- Know that when the person is nodding, it does not necessarily mean the person is comprehending or agreeing with what is being communicated
- Continue to be present with them and pause communication until you can organise appropriate help.

### **OFFERING INFORMATION AND SUPPORT TO THE PERSON**



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Be aware of your own negative experiences with the hearing world, including accessing (hearing) mental health professionals, but still offer informed, impartial information and support. You should make use of any community networks, knowledge and experiences (deaf network, interpreting community, deaf organisations), to find appropriate support people and services. Offer the person the full range of choices for information and support that are available.

If the person discusses particular people or incidents with you, try to remain neutral and non-judgemental about the people involved and the incidents.

Be aware that the person may not have the usual supportive network (family, friends, co-workers and neighbours) because they do not share sign language as the primary form of communication and that being with a Deaf person can be a powerful source of support. If the person is using substances, discuss with the person particular strategies for establishing a peer and support network that does not involve using substances.

#### **If the Person is Being Bullied**

Explain to the person that it is common to feel scared, embarrassed, depressed, alone and/or stressed when they are being bullied and telling someone is the first step to stopping bullying. Inform them that abuse of any kind, physical, sexual or emotional, is never appropriate and is not their fault.

If the person considers the bully a friend, you should discuss with the person what behaviours are appropriate in a friend, e.g. makes you feel good, encourages you, is happy to see you. Also, explain what behaviours are unacceptable, e.g. using you for transport, borrowing





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money, wanting you to buy things for them, blaming you when things go wrong, humiliating you.

If you believe that the person should report their bullying, ask them if they want to and how they want to report the bullying. If they are being bullied on social media, you should encourage them to report it to the relevant website or company.

Explain to the person that they should stop replying to any written or videoed communication from the bully and to save any records of the communications. If you suspect a privacy breach, you need to inform the person that there is an urgency to attend to the problem. If they change their username/password, advise them not to give out their personal information (address, password, bank information) unless they know and trust the person. You should encourage the person to explore options for courses or classes in how to use social media and the internet safely.

If the individual bullying the person is an interpreter, you should ensure the person knows that they have the right to choose an alternative interpreter they feel comfortable with and trust. If the person is experiencing bullying and awaiting a professional appointment, you should offer to regularly check-in with the person until the professional appointment can happen. If you suspect the person might be in danger from bullying, you should act immediately. Ask the person whether they feel they are in danger of ongoing physical harm from bullying and explain your concerns to the person. If you or the person are concerned about their safety, offer to help them make plans for how to manage the situation, e.g. hang out with supportive people, remove themselves from situation, make a safety plan. Support the person to remove themselves from the harmful situations by identifying a 'safe' or 'quiet' space, e.g. a friend's place, a public place.

### **Dealing with Multiple Roles**

Due to the small size of the Deaf community, you should take into account that you may have multiple roles or relationships with the person, e.g. you may also be the only other Deaf staff member in the person's work place. If you feel that the multiple roles or relationships you have with the person you are helping are preventing you from providing effective assistance to the person, you should offer to help the person to find another first aider.

However, in a crisis situation, you should offer to help them, even if you feel that your multiple roles or relationships with the person may prevent you from being as effective as you could be without the multiple roles.

## **ASSISTING THE PERSON TO ACCESS PROFESSIONAL HELP**



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Due to the small size of the Deaf community, you should be aware that the person may be reluctant to seek professional help. If they are reluctant, ask the person why. They may have a distrust of the health system, professional or interpreter, or have had past negative experiences. It may also be because they have an existing relationship with the (Deaf/hearing)



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professional. They might want to connect with (hearing) local support groups and services to maintain their confidentiality. Be aware that the person may have ongoing barriers with communication when accessing information and supports.

You should discuss different options for accessing help from a health professional and offer to help the person find a different source of professional help, including generic, deaf friendly and culturally and linguistically appropriate local services.

If the person is unfamiliar with how mental health professionals work with interpreters, you should explain it to the person and let them know that they can request a specific or different professional interpreter at any stage.

If the person wants you to accompany them to a professional appointment but you are not comfortable attending the appointment, discuss different ideas for who could accompany them.

If you do attend the professional appointment with the person, you should not control or take over the appointment. You may need to support the person to advocate for themselves for communication access, e.g. explaining how to contact a group or organisation, saying they can tell the professional that "it is my right to have an interpreter".

### **Confidentiality and Self-care**



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Due to the size and nature of the Deaf community, confidentiality is especially important. Do not discuss the person using any identifying characteristics with others. Do not disclose anything about the helping situation or the person, except where there is risk of harm to yourself or others.

If you experience the effects of vicarious trauma or feel unwell when or after assisting the person, reach out to known supports, e.g. another mental Health First Aider™, professional support.



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## **PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES**

These guidelines are designed to help Deaf Mental Health First Aiders to provide first aid to a Deaf person who may be experiencing a mental health problem. The role of the first aider is to assist the person until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis resolves.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THESE GUIDELINES**



**FIND THE AUSLAN TRANSLATION OF THIS SECTION HERE:**

<https://vimeo.com/451332150/f30daf1074>

These guidelines are based on the expert opinions of Australian and international Deaf consumers, and Deaf and hearing carers, mental health professionals, academics and Interpreters.

Details of the methodology can be found in: Ferndale, D., Bond, K. S., Kitchener, B. A., Jorm, A. F., Dark, F., Strobridge, S., Wood, N., Cave, M., & Cottrill, F. A. (2021). Development of mental health first aid guidelines for Deaf people: a Delphi expert consensus study on culturally appropriate responses to mental health problems experienced by a Deaf person. *International Journal on Mental Health and Deafness*, 5(1), 53–65.  
<http://ijmhd.org/index.php/ijmhd/article/view/61>

## **HOW TO USE THESE GUIDELINES**

It is important to tailor your support to the needs of the person you are helping. These guidelines are a general set of recommendations only, and most suitable for providing mental health first aid in high-income countries with developed health systems.

These guidelines have been developed as part of a suite of guidelines about how to best assist a person with mental health problems. These other guidelines can be downloaded from:

<https://mhfainternational.org/guidelines/>

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