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The Way I Hear It

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A Touchy Topic: What Should I Call My Hearing Loss Self?

When are you deaf enough to call yourself deaf and when do you hear well enough to call yourself:

hard of hearing,

person with hearing loss,

deaf,

a little deaf,

some or somewhat deaf,

oral deaf,

hearing impaired,

late deafened, or

HoH (usually written, not voiced, because it leads to confusion in certain circumstances),

…or, just pointing at your ears….

Welcome to *What Do I Call Myself*, not a particularly fun game but it keeps people hot under the

collar, revived every time somebody on FaceBook asks what they should call themselves.

I've been playing this game since I started publicly identifying with hearing loss (as if it weren't noticeable to anyone I ever conversed with).

For most of my life, I called myself *hard of hearing.* I knew that term, although I never liked its harsh sound. I wasn't familiar with hearing impaired, and the only other term was deaf which only recently has become audiologically appropriate for me.

At age 40 I became enlightened. I learned from the greater hearing loss community that hearing impairedwas not acceptable because it implied being *broken* or *lesser than.* Both the International Federation of Hard of Hearing People (IFHOH) and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) have declared hearing-impaired as a non-preferred term. Some years ago, the Hearing Loss Association of America changed their name from Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, as it's more inclusive of the different degrees of deafness and how people identify, including hearing aid and cochlear implant users. I joyfully started using 'person with hearing loss' as in, *"Could you speak up, please, I have hearing loss."*

But my preference aside, is there a universally acceptable self-appellation? No.

This is a personal choice, a self-descriptor. I've stopped judging a person for using a term I don't like, although I do wince inwardly when hearing care professionals use 'hearing-impaired,' but they've been trained to use it, as they see our hearing loss as an issue to be addressed, or even fixed. But I'm okay with that – I'd like them to fix it, too. (An extra ?? to hearing care professionals who use my preferred term - or who at least don't call me impaired.)

Some people with hearing loss say they struggle with terminology because they feel caught between two worlds, the Deaf world and the hearing world, possibly due to the devastating impact on their once-easy communication. While members of the Deaf community celebrate their distinct culture, 'hearing' people do not – because they don't have one. They simply *hear,* without trying. Like thinking or breathing, they just *do* it.

Adjusting to acquired hearing loss often means dealing with a new self-image that may not be positive. Using stigma-laden terms such as hard of hearing or hearing-impaired may contribute to this negativity.

In our book *Hear & Beyond: Live Skillfully with Hearing Loss*, Shari Eberts and I maintain that how we describe ourselves is a personal choice and should be respected. We don't care if others use a label that we dislike or that's not sufficiently progressive. What is far more important than a label is the need to positively self-identify with our hearing loss and learn how to meet communication needs.

Years ago, I wrote about hearing loss labels in a piece called What's in a Name? I concluded that to be truly inclusive and touch all bases, I would have to identify as follows: "Speak up please - I'm a some-deaf hoh who's hardly impaired with personal loss in both – (pointing at my ears) – you know…

But now, I'm a person who has hearing loss.