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# **USE OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL ASPECTS OF DEAFNESS COURSE AS A COUNSELING TOOL FOR DEAF STUDENTS**

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## **Abstract**

A Psycho-Social Aspects of Deafness course is frequently offered to hearing students in programs focusing on education, counseling, or social work with the deaf. At the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, it is offered to deaf students at the undergraduate level. The goals of the course are to enhance understanding of the impact of deafness on educational, psychological, emotional, and social development. The focus of this course is directed both to the cognitive domain, and the affective domain in terms of the expression and understanding of feelings, attitudes and values associated with the impact of hearing loss on the lives of deaf students and significant others within their social milieu. Course content, project description, and effective approaches for implementing this type of course in high schools, colleges and other programs serving deaf students are presented.

people who have grown up in hearing environments. The course covers topics about deafness and the impact it has on one's educational, social, and emotional growth. Information on how deafness affects families and ways that a deaf individual adjusts to deafness are included. Deaf students from hearing families enrolled in mainstreamed high school programs, in colleges that serve deaf students as well as deaf adults in various other educational programs can benefit from a course that covers topics on deafness issues.

## **Student Characteristics**

This elective course is open to all deaf students at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Half of the students enroll at the recommendation of their counselor, the remaining students enroll out of personal interest. Of the students who enroll, a majority are perlingually deaf and a small but growing number are either hard of hearing, experiencing progressive hearing loss or became deaf during early adulthood. Half of the students are from mainstreamed programs with the remainder from high schools which provided no support services for the deaf. Only a few are from residential programs.

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## **Introduction**

Psycho-Social Aspects of Deafness course is offered through the Department of General Education at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) and is designed to assist students who are postlingually deafened, hearing impaired individuals who use oral methods of communication and have had a little or no contact with other deaf people, and perlingually deaf

Individuals who have progressive hearing losses, or who have become deafened later in early adulthood, often feel overwhelmed by the shock of being deaf and having to cope with communication challenges. As those individuals struggle with

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their acquired deafness, they need information regarding deafness issues and benefit from participating in class discussions aimed at broadening awareness of impact of deafness on their own lives as well as on their family. Additionally, students struggle with developing coping skills needed to come to terms with their deafness.

Late deafened as well as congenitally deaf students who are enrolled in this class are often confronted with hearing people on the NTID/RIT campus, other deaf people, and/or their own deafness for the first time while they are enrolled at NTID. Thus, they need the opportunity to learn factual information and share personal experiences in a group setting offered by this course. Students who are enrolled in high school mainstreamed programs or in colleges with a small deaf program would benefit from having a course such as this to become aware and discuss issues that impact on their adjustment in a mainstreamed educational environment.

The Psycho-Social Aspects of Deafness course affords students the opportunity to discuss their feelings, attitudes, issues, and concerns regarding the psychosocial implications of deafness. By encouraging students to concentrate on sharing personal feelings and experiences, there emerges a deeper self understanding and heightened sensitivity to the impact of deafness on one's individual and social behavior.

### Course Content and Discussion

Sharing factual information, facilitating group discussions and encouraging students to share feelings that have never before been shared is an integral part of this course. Students learn to generalize their current experiences to past ones and see the cause and effect associations in educational, language, social, and family development to their current developmental stages.

Students also learn to step out of themselves, examine various psychosocial issues and develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of these various dynamics and their impact on their current situation. Having a deaf instructor who is sensitive to students as well as deafness issues, and who can assist students with sharing personal experiences is critical to the success of student shared learning experiences.

To illustrate the above points, a segment by segment synopsis of the psycho-social course will highlight major areas covered by the course. The reader is referred to Appendix A for the course syllabus.

The first part of the course introduces the objectives and sets the tone for the class in terms of sign language communication guidelines and guidelines for successful group discussion (i.e.: respecting student opinions, keeping discussions in class confidential, acknowledging the right to pass discussions he/she does not feel comfortable sharing publicly, etc.). Students are informed of the distinction between group sharing experiences versus a group therapy format. Students who express a need to discuss issues raised in class are encouraged to seek counseling assistance. The opening class discussion begins with each student sharing basic family, educational and deafness background information. Students are also asked to identify themselves as deaf, hard of hearing, late deafened which then evolves to a discussion of labels, assumptions people make about labels and myths that have generally been associated with deafness. After discussing the meaning of and generating examples of common myths, students share personal experiences of being stereotyped. They share and compare how each person has dealt with being stereotyped and what they would do if a similar situation should arise. Brief self disclosures on similar experiences by the instructor adds to the student discussions. Students become aware that stereotyping occurs largely due to lack

of information about deafness and learn how misinformation can be tactfully corrected.

In the following segment, the topic shifts to discussing deaf culture. Students discuss the Martha Vineyard's study (2) and compare that information to today's views regarding deaf people's infusion into the hearing culture. The question of "should society accommodate to deaf people's needs, or should deaf people accommodate to hearing society's needs" become the focal point of a class debate which helps to heighten deaf individuals' awareness of societal attitudes and how those attitudes have changed through time. The discussion also helps students develop a resource of strategies/information that would help promote continuation of positive attitudinal changes.

On the topic of deaf culture, articles from various sources written by deaf authors are used (refer to Appendix B for listing of resources used for this course). In discussing cultural classifications from the Neil Glickman article (1986), students become engaged in a discussion of the differences between cultures and how or why they define themselves culturally at the present moment in contrast to how they defined themselves during their earlier educational years. They also talk about how their parents define themselves and why. Students gain a better awareness and understanding of the cultural changes as one matures and becomes more knowledgeable and accepting of his/her own deafness.

During the next segment, the topic focuses on deaf education. Students learn about the history behind influential leaders who shaped deaf education (i.e.: Aristotle, Abbe L'Épée, Heinicke, Sicard, Briarwood, T.H. Gallaudet, E.M. Gallaudet). Students become exposed to the various educational and communication philosophies as well as to the "oral-manual controversy". Through readings and class discussions, students gain a better understanding of why their parents may have chosen a particular

educational/communication. They also have a better understanding of how the oral/manual controversy has had and still continues to have a strong impact on deaf education. They learn about how the current ASL (American Sign Language) movement is influencing deaf education in the 1990's and discuss what that movement means in terms of future deaf children's language development.

Discussing and comparing language development between deaf individuals with varying hearing losses and from different educational/communication background occurs next. Students experience astonishment at the varied reading and writing levels and have a greater understanding of why deaf individuals experience difficulties with mastering written and/or spoken language. Students comment at the revelation that poor grades were inaccurately thought to be a reflection of one's intelligence, rather than correctly attributing it to the language lag commonly experienced by born deaf individuals.

Following language development information, audiological information is introduced. Causes of deafness and types of genetic diseases are discussed (e.e.: Usher's syndrome, Warrdenberg's syndrome). Students become acquainted with various terminology such as: congenitally deaf, adventitiously deaf, sensi-neural loss, conductive loss, and how the different range of hearing loss impact on a person's educational and social development. A lively discussion defining the terms hard of hearing, hearing impaired and deaf concludes this topic area. Students become aware of the use of labels and how deaf and hearing people have conflicting interpretations of those labels.

During the following segment, the topic includes discussion of the various defense mechanisms and coping strategies commonly used by individuals with major life challenges as well as those with disabilities. Students are helped to

understand how mechanisms of adjustments are used as coping strategies in dealing with having a deaf child in a hearing family. Students are better able to understand the adjustments they or other deaf people may have experienced as well as understanding what their parents may have experienced in coping with having a deaf child.

During another class, discussion of self concept and how deafness impacts on one's self concept takes precedence. Students discuss and compare articles on self concept written by deaf authors and researchers in the field of deaf education.

The last several segments focus on discussing and comparing impact of deafness for those who are born deaf, are hard of hearing, or who became deaf later in life. Experiences, quotes from individuals with different degrees of hearing loss are discussed and contrasted. Time is spent discussing how each member of a hearing family copes/adapts to having a deaf child or to having a late deafened young adult. Articles, films, and film discussions are incorporated. Films include: "We Tiptoed Around Whispering", "And Your Name is Jonah".

During the last two days of class, discussion on roles of deaf adults in dissemination of information on deafness/communication needs, strategies to promote increased awareness among peers, friends, co-workers and family members are shared.

In conclusion, students cover a wide array of topical areas and are afforded every opportunity to delve into the realm of feelings, attitudes, and concerns regarding the psychosocial implications of deafness. They also gain a greater understanding of themselves, other deaf people and their families. Students not only learn from their classroom experiences but also from individual class projects and optional counseling sessions. Students voluntarily seek individual counseling to talk about family interaction concerns, to process information from class discussions, to process information from

a family interview, or to ventilate feels regarding past and/or current experiences with deafness. Additionally, strategies to foster increased understanding within their family milieu are discussed.

#### **Projects**

Two projects are required of all students who enroll in the Psycho-Social Aspects course. At the conclusion of the course, students are encouraged to share what they learned from the projects with classmates.

The first project is a family interview assignment where students are required to interview at least five family members (i.e.: parents, siblings, extended family members). Students design their own interview questions, ask questions from each family member, and tabulate a summary of each family member's comments. Students substantiate their interview findings with information from class lectures, and course textbooks. Students are graded on the thoroughness of their interview, the type of questions asked, the type of summary they write, and description of what they learned from the interview project.

The second project is a Personal Essay Project whereby students are given questions which encourage them to think about, and reflect on personal experiences. Students are given a list of twelve possible questions, eight of which must be chosen. Again, like the first project, students are strongly encouraged to substantiate their comments with text readings and with class lecture materials.

#### **Evaluation and Outcome**

A mid term exam, a take home final exam and two project reports are used to evaluate cognitive and attitudinal dimensions. Each of the activities attempt to tie information learned from the classroom and from text readings. By the end of the course, students demonstrate their

understanding of specific topics presented are able to explain why family members react or respond in specific ways based on their understanding of family development, family dynamics, and impact of deafness on family members. Students are also able to describe how deafness impacts on one's educational and social development as well as how the impact of deafness differs from one who is born deaf, to one who became deaf later in life and one who has a progressive hearing loss to those who are hard of hearing.

Benefits derived from this course are reflected in student's written comments. Comments ranged from development of a greater understanding of deaf individuals and hearing parents' experiences to realization of how and why deaf individuals and/or parents react the way they do. One individual assumed that because her parents did not talk about their earlier years to not having had any adjustment problems during those years. Another individual assumed that the only adjustment a late deafened individual needed to be accepted by the deaf community was to learn American Sign Language. Listening to and sharing personal feelings also enhanced their understanding of self and others.

### **Conclusion**

Lectures, group discussion, project assignments, readings and individual counseling tools are used in a Psycho-Social Aspects of Deafness course as techniques to delve into the student's affective domain, and to facilitate students' awareness of themselves as deaf individuals. This approach has been highly effective. Responses of students to the combined counseling techniques and instructional approach have been overwhelmingly positive. Students have commented on the positive impact the course and project assignments had on their perspective and attitudes towards deafness. A course like this can successfully be incorporated in mainstreamed high school programs and colleges with a deaf program. It is suggested that the instructor who wishes to incorporate this model have knowledge of deafness and student issues and has had experiences in facilitating group discussions with students. It is also recommended that the instructor become familiar with current research and articles in the deafness literature. Last, but not least it is recommended that the instructor be deaf so that students can identify with and relate to someone who may have had similar experiences, and to provide a role model of adjustment for students who are experiencing difficulties with accepting his/her own deafness.

## References

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- Skyer, S. Psycho-Social Aspects of Deafness Course as a Counseling Tool for the Hearing Impaired. *American Annals of the Deaf*, June, 1982.
- Groce, N. *Everyone Here Spoken Sign Language*. Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Glickman, N. Cultural Identity, Deafness, and Mental Health (October, 1986). *Journal of Rehabilitation of the Deaf*, Vol. 20(2).
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## Media Materials

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1. *And Your Name is Jonah*  
Captioned by and made available through Gallaudet University. They will dub a videotape for requesters. Gallaudet University Media Center/Library, Kendall Green, Washington, D.C. 20002
2. *We Tiptoed Around Whispering*  
Sales through: U.S. National Audio Visual Center, General Services Administration, Washington, D.C. 20409. Rental through: Western Maryland College Media Center, Westminster, Maryland 21157.

## USE OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL ASPECTS

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### Appendix A

#### Course Syllabus

Introduction to Course and Course Requirements  
Myths and Attitudes associated with Deafness  
Societal Attitudes: Martha's Vineyard Study  
Deaf Culture (Meadows, Padden, Clickman articles)  
History of Deaf Education, Influential Leaders of Deaf Educ.  
The Communication Debate, The Oral and Manual Controversy  
Language Development between Deaf and Hearing Children  
Audiological Information, Causes of Deafness  
Defense Mechanisms and Coping Mechanisms  
Impact of Deafness on Self Concept  
Impact of Deafness on Born Deaf Individuals  
Film: "And Your Name is Jonah"/"That Makes Two of Us"  
Impact of Deafness on the Hard of Hearing  
Impact of Deafness on Deafened Individuals  
Impact of Deafness on the Hearing Family  
Film "We Tiptoed Around Whispering"  
Deaf Parents with Hearing Children  
Roles of Deaf Adults in Promoting Positive Attitudinal  
changes/Effective Communication Strategies

### Appendix B

#### Psycho-Social Course Text Books

##### Required Text:

1. They Grow in Silence by Vernon and Mindel (2nd ed.)
2. A Hug Just Isn't Enough by Ferris
3. Never the Twain Shall meet by Winefield

##### Optional Text: (Per Student Interest and/or Student Need)

1. Everyone Here Spoken Sign Language by Groce
2. A Loss for Words by Walker
3. Deaf Like Me by Spradley and Spradley
4. Coping with Hearing Loss by Rezen and Hausman
5. The Silent Garden by Ogden and lipsett
6. Turning Points by Scouten
7. Changing the Rules by Bowe
8. Readings on Deafness by Watson
9. What's That Pig Outdoors by Kisor
10. A Place of Their Own by Van Cleve and Crouch
11. In Silence by Sidransky
12. The Randy Inskip Story: Keys to Success for Hard of Hearing People by McCay Vernon and Randy Inskip