

I knew from a young age that my hearing wasn't 'normal', I just didn't tell anyone. My grandmother was deaf and used to lip read, and people just thought I was being cute when I said I lip read too.

The reality of hearing loss is that it's isolating, and a lot of people don't understand. You can see how strong or weak someone's glasses are, you can see a limb that is missing or doesn't work, but you cannot visibly see hearing loss. I've had former colleagues tell me I'm "not that deaf" after accusing me of ignoring them, which is unacceptable behaviour.

I write about my hearing loss often, if only to reach out to people who were embarrassed to have this disability. It is nothing to be ashamed of, as I know now, and there is such a welcoming deaf community.

I was bullied enough at school, I didn't want to add a hearing aid into the mix! My schools never noticed I couldn't hear properly, as I always did well in exams. I did well until I got a D in my German AS Reading, Writing and Listening exam.

No matter the volume, I could not understand the woman's voice. I know now that it was because I couldn't hear the pitch of her voice, but I was too embarrassed to tell my teachers why I failed. I retook it the next year, able to use headphones as it was only me taking the exam this time, and scraped a C.

Ironically, I achieved an A in the speaking exam because I could read my teacher's lips and respond appropriately!

Lipreading was, and still is, my main coping strategy, despite having a hearing aid. It became increasingly difficult to lipread during the Covid pandemic, due to masks, and I know I'm not alone in having felt more isolated than ever before. A lot of people suddenly felt uncomfortable going into shops and speaking to people for a whole different reason.

I'm currently a student at the Open University. I dropped out of a physical university as a teenager, for a multitude of reasons, and when I was finally ready to return to higher education, the Open University seemed like the best choice for me.

In terms of accessibility, the OU has been, quite frankly, incredible for me. I have not had to have any awkward phone calls, as the primary communication method is email.

Every video I've watched on my course has had a subtitle option, something I am very grateful for. Similarly, for audio recordings there is always an accurate transcript that I can view online or download. Some of my tutorials have been recorded and can be watched back, and I have also had tutors who are happy to use their video so that I can lipread.

I remember being the person at school who hated watching videos in class because they were always too loud and the teachers rarely turned-on subtitles. By attending OU, I can cut out the middleman of awkward experiences and I feel like the inclusivity has only heightened my enjoyment of my degree course so far.

Thank you for reading, and I hope that the more our community highlights how important good accessibility is, the less we will need an awareness week with gestures including being able to see subtitled films at normal hours for one week a year!

