



Getting Started: American Sign Language (ASL)

Target audience: Mental Health professionals working with Deaf individuals who wish to learn more about ASL.

- American Sign Language has its own syntax and grammar rules which is often shown through:
 - o Body language
 - o Facial “grammar”
- Signed languages are not the same from country to country, even ASL has regional variations within the United States.
- ASL is based on a combination of French Sign Language and local signs from the Martha’s Vineyard area
 - o Martha’s Vineyard used to be home to a large population of Deaf individuals
 - o The majority of people on the island, hearing and Deaf, used signed language to communicate
- ASL is visual and also takes up more physical space than speech
 - o Consider seating arrangements
- Active nature of ASL can be misunderstood for aggression
 - o Especially in retelling stories – signer will take on countenance, mannerisms and emotions of each person in the story.
 - o This can have unfortunate consequences for those in:
 - Psychiatric settings, legal settings including incarceration
 - Education, employment, social settings
 - o Individuals can be misunderstood as being out of control or defiant.
- ASL is used to “paint a complete picture”, some individuals will give the entire backstory when providing an answer to a question asked
- The language acquisition period for learning ASL is shorter than that of spoken language.
 - o Studies show that deaf children who learn ASL fluently as a first, natural language are able to pick up English more easily as a second language.