I am deaf. And even though I have used a cochlear implant for most of my life, I do not hear perfectly nor do I speak perfectly. The summer weeks prior to entering high school and 9th grade were stressful. My mind was filled with questions: How difficult will it be to understand my teachers? How many of my classes will include lectures and will I be able to understand all that is said? How difficult will it be for me socially in a school with almost 4,000 students? As a high school student, I came up with communication and coping strategies I would like to share, as they made my education as a student with hearing loss much more enjoyable and somewhat easier.

Accommodations: Be Proactive

Every year before the start of a new grade, I got in touch with my itinerant teacher so that she could help me prepare for my first day of classes, and she sure did! She helped me arrange meetings with each of my teachers where we discussed the accommodations that I would need to be successful. For me, these included instructing each of my teachers on how to use my FM transmitter, requesting preferential seating at the front of the classroom to help me with my lip-reading, asking for a note-taker for classes with long lectures and requesting that closed captioning be used for in-class videos. By going in the week before school started, I saved myself from having to ask for accommodations on a limited bell schedule and in front of a full class of students (something that I have never found easy to do).

Having a hearing loss puts us at a disadvantage compared to most others when we arrive at high school, but never hesitate to ask for help; teachers love going out of their way to help their students succeed – if you can think of an accommodation that may help, never hesitate to ask for it!

Go to Tutorials

When I didn’t understand some of the information presented by my teacher in class, I would always make an effort to go for tutorials. Beginning in the 11th grade, I would go for tutorials almost every chance I could. At the time, I found my Advanced Placement Chemistry class particularly difficult; however, by going to tutorials and receiving one-on-one instruction in a quiet environment, I was able to learn some difficult concepts in no time at all! As for tutorials, my philosophy has always been that you can always go home and spend hours studying the material and maybe understand it in the end, or you can go in for tutorials, ask the teacher to repeat himself and learn the same material in possibly 30 minutes or less.

My hardest class was always English, and I’m sure it is the same with many students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Most of my English classes consisted of a lecture for which I would use a note-taker, but the amount of information I had to try to comprehend seemed overwhelming at times. To make matters more difficult, my classes would sometimes have group discussions during which I could hardly follow the conversation at all. On the days there were group discussions, I would go in for English tutorials after school and would ask my English teacher about some of the important
concepts arising from the day’s discussion. My teachers would always explain some of the main points from the discussion so that I could use them in essays, free responses and other assignments. In particular, I remember my 11th grade English teacher always went into great detail if I needed her to – she never hesitated to help me understand! I could never come up with any direct ways to benefit from class discussions, but fortunately they became less frequent as I got older. I always did all my work and read everything I was assigned (even overviews on the Internet and Spark/Cliffs notes) to get ahead in order to compensate for classroom discussions.

Be Social

When I was 8 years old, my parents enrolled me in piano lessons and I continued taking them for almost eight years. I must say that learning an instrument has been one of the greatest time investments I have made in my life thus far! Sure, it was more difficult for me to learn than a child with typical hearing (as I saw myself in comparison to my brother) but it is possible! By learning an instrument I became accustomed to a broader range of sounds, but even more exciting (and probably to some peoples’ amazement) – I, a teenager who is deaf, can make music with my own two hands! Once in high school, I thought finding new friends would be difficult so with my musical experience, I joined the marching band in the percussion pit where I played drums, marimba and other keyboards. High school bands and orchestras are excellent opportunities to meet new people: everybody is broken up into their individual sections according to instrument, and with the amount of time devoted to practices and performances you get to know each other very well. I made several very good friends in band. I would also strongly recommend becoming a participant in some of the clubs your school has to offer. If there is a club that you might find interesting – join it! I was interested in learning sign language so I joined my school’s Deaf Culture Club. Being the only student with hearing loss in my school, the club sponsor was more than happy to have me there! I learned some sign language phrases and befriended everyone in the club. I had the opportunity to perform “Silent Night” in American Sign Language when we visited an all-deaf school, and until then I never realized how many others there were like me! I also joined the National Science Honor Society because of my keen interest in the science and technical fields. Joining clubs is a great way to meet new people because where else can you find people who have similar interests as you?

Going Forward

Beginning high school was very stressful for me as I thought I would fall behind my peers because of my hearing loss. However, as weeks went by I realized that I greatly benefited from the things mentioned above, and I had fewer worries about high school. Through my hard work and the help of my teachers I learned what was taught and I was able to make many new friends. In May of 2009 I graduated from high school with honors and began to consider the next chapter in my life. In choosing a university, I wanted to keep my learning environment as much like high school as possible. By applying to several smaller schools, I believed I would have more chances to learn things one-on-one from professors. All through high school I was most interested in mathematics, chemistry and human biology. Currently, I am a freshman at the University of Tulsa (TU) in Oklahoma studying chemical engineering with a pre-medicine minor. I received several generous academic scholarships which made going to a private school more affordable for my family. At TU, most of my classes are similar in size to high school and so I have been able to continue using my coping strategies. I have gotten to know my professors well – one has even offered me a summer research opportunity in the chemical engineering field! I am deaf. I donot hear perfectly nor do I speak perfectly. But I have worked hard and developed some coping strategies that made high school, and now university, a very positive experience. Although my future plans are still unclear, I do know one thing: success is my goal and failure is not an option!