

Vision Loss Resources

Blind Culture, Best Practices & Sighted Guide Technique

The following suggestions and tips are offered as guidelines to facilitate interaction and increase understanding between people who are blind or visually impaired and those who are sighted. It is important to keep in mind that each person is an individual and that eye conditions vary from person to person. The guidelines may need to be adapted to suit the particular abilities, preferences and needs of the individual with vision loss.

Information about Blindness

The term *blind* does not necessarily mean complete loss of sight, but could also describe varying degrees of functional vision. Over 90% of individuals who are blind have some remaining vision which can be used for a variety of tasks such as reading or travel. With the use of adaptive techniques, other sensory information or special equipment, most persons who are blind or visually impaired can remain independent. The incidence of blindness is increasing primarily because people are living longer. Major causes of visual impairment are macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, and cataracts.

Often, people with vision loss have had some training on 'Orientation and Mobility Skills' which is the term employed to refer to the techniques used to travel independently. This can include learning to use a white cane, learning how to interpret sounds in the environment and learning how to navigate public transportation options. Some people use a Guide Dog as their main method traveling safely.

- **White Canes:** Many people who are blind or visually impaired use the white cane both as a mobility tool, and as a courtesy to others. Not all modern white canes are designed to fulfill the same primary function. Each type of cane serves a slightly different need. Mobility canes are often made from aluminum, graphite, carbon-fiber or composite fiber, and can come with a wide variety of tips depending upon user preference.

The Long Cane: This "traditional" white cane is designed primarily as a mobility tool used to feel obstacles in the path of a user. Cane length depends upon the height of a user, and is traditionally measured from the sternum.

Identification Cane: The ID cane is used primarily to alert others as to the bearer's visual impairment. It is often lighter and shorter than the long cane, and is more limited as a mobility tool.

The Support Cane: The white support cane is designed primarily to offer physical stability to a visually impaired user. By virtue of its color, the cane also works as a means of identification. This tool has very limited potential as a mobility device. Some people may use both a Support and Long Cane.

- **Guide Dogs:** Remember that this dog is responsible for leading someone who cannot see. The dog should never be distracted from that duty. A person's safety may depend on their dog's alertness and concentration. It is okay to ask someone if you may pet their guide. Many people enjoy introducing their dogs when they have the time. The dog's primary responsibility is to its blind partner and it is important that the dog not become solicitous.

A Guide Dog should never be offered food or other distracting treats. The dogs are fed on a schedule and follow a specific diet in order to keep them in optimum condition. Even slight deviations from their routine can disrupt their regular eating and relieving schedules and seriously inconvenience their handlers. Guide Dogs are trained to resist offers of food so they will be able to visit restaurants without begging.

Although Guide Dogs cannot read traffic signals, they are responsible for helping their handlers safely cross a street. Calling out to a Guide Dog or intentionally obstructing its path can be dangerous for the team as it could break the dog's concentration on its work.

Listening for traffic flow has become harder for Guide Dog handlers due to quieter car engines and the increasing number of cars on the road. Please don't honk your horn or call out from your car to signal when it is safe to cross. This can be distracting and confusing.

When they are not in harness, Guide Dogs are treated in much the same way as pets. However, for their safety they are only allowed to play with specific toys. Don't offer toys without first asking their handler's permission.

In some situations, working with a Guide Dog may not be appropriate. Instead, the handler may prefer to take your arm just above the elbow and allow their dog to heel. Others will prefer to have their dog follow you. In this case, be sure to talk to the handler and not the dog when giving directions for turns.

A Guide Dog can make mistakes and must be corrected in order to maintain its training. This correction usually involves a verbal admonishment coupled with a leash correction, followed by praise when the dog regains focus and correctly follows a command. Guide Dog handlers have been taught the appropriate correction methods to use with their dogs.

When you meet someone with a visual impairment

Some people may feel uneasy when thinking about talking with a person who is blind or visually impaired. Simply extend the same courtesies and respect to persons who are blind or visually impaired that you would to anyone you meet. Below are some helpful suggestions:

- **Introduce yourself.** Speak upon entering a room or area where there is a blind person. For example, "Hi Mary, it's Ann." In many instances, the visually impaired person will offer a hand for you to shake when meeting for the first time. If others are present when greeting a blind person, use a name or provide some cue so the blind person can tell whom the greeting is intended for. Introduce him/her to anyone else with you and do not leave out children. Make sure they know when you're leaving a space -don't leave someone talking to an empty room!
- **Don't shout.** Speak in a normal and comfortable tone. Blindness does not affect hearing or intelligence. Some seniors may also have hearing loss, but not always.
- **Speak directly.** Speak to the person and not to or through a third party. The visually impaired person can answer for themselves.
- **Avoid Visual Language.** Remember that nods, shrugs and hand gestures may not be noticed as clues to what you are conveying. For example, avoid pointing while saying "The book is over there." Be specific when giving directions. For example, "to the right of your plate" or "three blocks north" are helpful phrases.
- **Don't move objects.** Don't move personal items or rearrange furniture. If a blind person does not see changes in their surroundings, the result can be injury. All cabinet, closet and room doors should be fully opened or fully closed. If you are offered a cup of coffee, make sure the person knows where you leave it when done. Always push chairs back under a table when leaving as well.
- **Use common phrases.** Do not avoid words like blind, look, see, watch etc. These words are part of everyday conversation and are not offensive
- **Find common interests.** Feel free to discuss and attend movies or sporting events with persons who are blind or visually impaired. They enjoy common activities as much as anyone. He/she too watches TV, visits with friends, and goes places. They do the same things as you, but sometimes use different techniques.

Offering assistance

Remember that persons who are blind choose the areas of their lives in which to remain independent and the areas in which they welcome assistance. There are many ways in which you can be helpful to a blind person in everyday situations, but always ask if the person wishes assistance first. If help is needed, they'll be grateful. If not, they will thank you for asking. One of our clients requested that folks kind enough to offer assistance should also be kind enough to keep sympathy from their voice. Below are some instances in which you may want to offer assistance:

- **Unfamiliar settings.** If you enter a space new to the visually impaired person, or notice someone who may be confused as to their surroundings make sure to ask if they would like some assistance or a description of the space. Be brief and descriptive and proceed in order. Start with the scene directly facing the person, and then proceed by telling what is to the right, behind, and to the left. Use right or left according to the way they are facing, or use the face of a clock as a way to reference objects. For example, describe the layout of a room, whether it is square or narrow, how many tables and chairs there are and how they are arranged.
- **Reading.** If asked to read something, make sure to read ALL materials clearly as they appear on the page; do not read excerpts or summarize unless requested to do so. Read clearly and at a comfortable pace. People may require assistance with mail, magazines, books, directions, coupons, filling out forms, proof reading or looking up information. When reading mail it is best to start with the return address. If asked to read material with unfamiliar vocabulary, just let the person know and try your best. Avoid using voices for characters or dialects - unless done skillfully, this can be confusing. Pause briefly at the end of each paragraph. If asked to read longer items, such as newspapers, magazines, menus etc. simply start with a table of contents or similar listing of topics and let the person choose which areas they would like you to go into further detail on.
- **Dining out.** When you dine with a blind person, offer to read the menu (with prices) if the restaurant doesn't provide a Large Print or Brailled menu. You may also want to describe the table setting – where the forks, glasses, napkins, salt and pepper are, etc. The location of food servings can be described as numerals on a clock-face. “Potatoes at 2, fish at 6.”
- **Monetary transactions.** There are techniques people use to identify money. If you have a money transaction, name each bill so that he or she may fold it according to the individual's own method for identification. Coins do not need to be named as they can easily be identified by touch.

Sighted Guide Technique

The Sighted Guide Technique is widely accepted as the safest, most efficient way for a person with a visual impairment to walk with a sighted person. The most important thing to remember regarding guiding is to never push, pull or grab a visually impaired person – except in the case of an emergency. Suddenly being grabbed or pushed can be extremely startling, disorienting and potentially embarrassing.

Making Contact

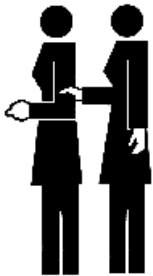
Just as with any kind of assistance, the first thing you want to do is introduce yourself and offer assistance. Simply saying “Would you like to go Sighted Guide” or “Would you like an arm” conveys to the person that you are willing and able to act as a guide. If the person says yes, then you may ask which side they prefer. Most often the guide will be on the right hand side.

Simply touch the back of your hand to the back of their hand and ask them to take your arm. That will indicate where you are and they can then use your hand as a signal to slide their hand up to your elbow.



Grip

The guide should keep their arm relaxed and hanging loosely at their side for the most part. The visually impaired person will grip just above your elbow with the thumb on the outside of your arm and the rest of the fingers on the inside giving them a 90 degree bend at their elbow. The grip should be firm enough to maintain contact while walking, but not so firm as to cause discomfort to the guide. If someone seems to be having difficulty with the hand position, just ask if they would like an explanation or help in getting their positioning correct.



Someone who is unsteady or frail may ‘tuck’ their hand in the bend of the guide’s elbow for a more secure grip. You will need to maintain a secure bend of their arm to provide this extra support. It’s often easiest to rest your palm on your stomach for this technique.



If the visually impaired person is much taller than their guide, or uncomfortable with the close contact, they may choose to simply place their hand on the guide's shoulder. The guide follows the techniques below, but must be much more vocal about obstacles etc.

If the visually impaired person is much shorter than their guide, such as a child, they may grasp their guide's wrist instead.



Body Position

The guide stands at the visually impaired person's side, one half step ahead. The person will then be able to follow your body movements when walking, stopping, etc. The visually impaired person may choose to continue to use their white cane or guide dog as an extra safety measure even when walking with a guide. Set a comfortable pace for both of you. Check in and ask if they are doing ok as you start.

Narrow Passages

When it is difficult to walk two abreast, the guide moves their arm backward toward the center of their back and gives a verbal cue that there is a narrow space coming up. The visually impaired person responds by straightening out their arm and stepping behind the guide so they are single file. When the space opens up, the guide should simply alert the person and then bring your arm back to the normal position.



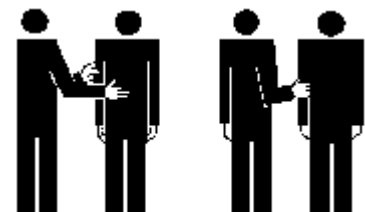
Doors and Switching Sides

When approaching a door there are two pieces of information the guide should relate:

1. Which direction the door opens (towards us or away from us).
2. Which side the hinges are on.

The visually impaired person should be on the same side as the hinges, which lets them assist with the door if necessary. If they happen to be on the wrong side of the hinges, the guide simply needs to ask the visually impaired person to switch to the other arm as such:

1. Let the person know you want them to switch to your other arm
2. The guide sticks their opposite elbow behind them while staying in the same spot.
3. The visually impaired person drops the elbow they were holding and (may or may not) trail their hand across their guide's back to find the other elbow.



4. The visually impaired person grasps the new elbow with the appropriate hand and the switch is complete.

Switching sides can also be used as needed to avoid obstacles to find handrailings as needed.

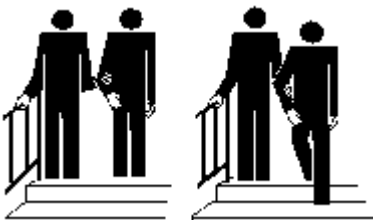
Now that you are on the correct sides, use the narrow passage technique as you head through the doorway. The guide will open the door and make sure the visually impaired person's free hand is able to find the door to hold it open for themselves if it is a self closing style. If the visually impaired person is unable to hold the door open, the guide can use their free hand to support the door until both parties are through.



Steps

Always warn a visually impaired person when you are approaching curbs or stairs and let them know if they go up or down. Be careful that you don't warn them too far in advance or you may notice that they slow way down in anticipation! Make sure you always approach an elevation change squarely and not at an angle. To safely navigate stairs:

1. When you reach the first step, stop.
2. You want the visually impaired person on the side of the handrail, if necessary, switch sides.
3. If they don't find the handrail on their own, tell them you'll place their free hand on the handrail and then do so with your free hand.
4. When ready, the guide takes the first step and the visually impaired person follows about a half a step behind so they can feel when the stairs are complete.
5. When the visually impaired person comes to the final step, they will use their toes to tap ahead just to check. You can reinforce that there are no more steps by saying something like "that was the last step" or "we can go forward now".



Some people may choose to let go of the guide entirely and only use the handrail to navigate the stairs. Simply wait for them at the top/bottom of the stairs and use the initial contact method to regroup.

Seating

When approaching a chair, the guide indicates which way the chair is facing (to the front, the back or the side) There are slightly different steps to guiding depending on the orientation of the chair:

1. From the front: Walk up to the chair until the knees of the visually impaired person are touching the front of the chair. They will then let go of the guide and turn to sit of their own accord after feeling the arms and seat.
2. From the back: Walk to the back of the chair and place the visually impaired person's free hand on the back of the chair. Let them know which side of the chair to walk to in order to reach the front. If they need to pull it out (perhaps from a table) to have room to sit relate that as well. They will then let go of the guide and maneuver themselves to the front of the chair.
3. From the side: Walk up to the chair and place the visually impaired person's free hand on the back of the chair and tell them where the front of the chair is in relation. Again, let them know if there is a table in close proximity to be mindful of. They will then orient and sit by themselves.



To avoid injury, be sure to alert the person if a chair has no back at all. If there is a wall directly behind the chair, share that information so they don't hit their heads as they sit. Some chairs have wheels, so you may need to stabilize it until they are seated safely. If you are in an auditorium style of seats, the guide should lead the way down the aisle (using the narrow spaces technique) until the person is in front of an open seat. Be sure to describe the location of the nearest fire exit in this situation.

Car Travel

The first thing a guide should do is describe the type of car – compact four door, taller truck, bus, etc. To assist someone into a car:

1. Guide them up to the door of the car and open the door.
2. Place their free hand on either the open door or the frame of the opening, depending on which side you are on.
3. Take the hand that is gripping your elbow and place it, again, on either the open door or the frame of the opening.



The visually impaired person will most likely navigate the rest by themselves by feeling where the seat is in relation to the doorway. You may want to keep a hand near their head if you think they may hit it on the frame. Offer to close the door for them but make sure you get a verbal OK before doing so. If they need assistance with the seatbelt, do so once you are seated in the driver's

position as it will be much easier. Some people may only need you to place their hand on the door handle and they will manage the rest. Simply ask how much assistance they would like if it's your first time guiding that person to a car.

Environmental Surroundings

If you are walking, driving etc with a visually impaired person, describe the route you are taking and discuss the environment using landmarks and descriptions of the surroundings. Try to give specific information, but only as much as needed - too much information can be confusing.

As you are walking, if there is a significant change in what is underfoot, let the person know. For example, going from squishy grass to cement or tile floor to thick carpets. Also make sure to mention if there is a ramp up or down coming so they can adjust their center of gravity.

When entering a new room, it is helpful to describe what is in the room. Use the door of the room as a reference point and describe the location of objects and people in the room.

1. Describe the shape of the room - round, rectangular, open space, etc.
2. Using the face of a clock describe location of things like other doors, windows, tables, chairs, other furniture, people, etc.

Breaking Contact

Once you have reached a destination and described the surroundings, it is time to break contact. Make sure before you break contact that you put the person in touch with an object such as a wall or piece of furniture. Simply leaving them in space can be extremely nerve-wracking and disorienting.

Sighted Guide Pushing a Wheelchair

The steps are very similar to regular Sighted Guide Technique:

1. The guide should identify themselves to the person before beginning travel.
2. Check to make sure the person is securely positioned in the chair.
3. The guide should identify the destination of the route.
4. Maintain a slow to moderate pace for safety.
5. Throughout travel, identify changes in direction, gradient and other relevant information to increase environmental awareness.
6. When traveling in an elevator, verbalize this to the person. Identify which floor you are on and which floor is your destination. Identify turns and direction reversal for orientation purposes.
7. If negotiating a curb, first identify that there is one coming up and if it is up or down and the direction of the chair's tilt if no ramp is available.
8. When approaching a door, identify this to the person. If the door is open, the person should be told that they are passing through an open door and may make contact with the frame as they pass through. If the door is closed and the person's chair is

turned so that they back through the door, they may also contact the door with their hand. The turning around of the chair however may result in disorientation.

Sighted Guide for an Independent Wheelchair Traveler

When the person is propelling the chair independently:

1. The guide should identify themselves and monitor safety skills as the person travels.
2. When traveling through an open space, voice cueing and or use of other auditory cues is usually helpful for the visually impaired person. Simply ask how much information the person would like as they travel.

When leaving a person in a wheelchair, make sure they are oriented to the environment. Is it next to a table, wall etc. Tell them where others are in the room and where you are/will be. Always tell the person you are leaving their side or if there is a change in guides.

That's a lot of information, how will I remember it all? When you meet someone who is blind or visually impaired just be yourself, use common sense, and let the rest happen. Below is a good summary of the Culture, Courtesies and Sighted Guide Techniques you have learned.

Vision Loss Resources
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