

How to Interact with a Person Who is Blind or Visually Impaired

If you meet someone who is blind or visually impaired and you're not sure what to do or say, this information guide is for you. It is intended as a guide for anyone who wants to help or simply to talk ... but does not know where to begin. If you remember that most blind people are different only in regard to their vision, you'll be off to a good start.

Blindness does not affect hearing or intelligence. It does not change character or personality, and it does not bestow special qualities or powers. It affects vision in people we know as friends, neighbors, and family.

So what do you do when you meet a blind person? Here are some hints we think will help:

- Be yourself, relax, and speak directly to a blind person in a normal tone of voice. Don't be afraid to approach him, and if you can't decide if he needs help, simply ask... it's the natural thing to do. But don't underestimate his ability or force help upon him. He'll let you know what he needs.
- Until a blind person knows your voice, identify yourself when you meet, along with anyone else who enters the conversation. When you leave, say so. Everything in between is just normal talk. Feel free to use words like "look" and "see," but avoid pointing and other visual language ("the book is over there," for example).
- Do not pet or talk to guide dogs while they are working (in harness). It can be distracting. Also, don't pull on a blind person's travel cane. If she requests travel assistance, let her take your arm, just above the elbow, and follow your body movements.
- If you come to a door, mention how it opens (in or out, left or right). Indicate the direction of stairs (up or down), and if they are wide or narrow. As you can see, a lot of this is well-applied common sense.
- When showing a blind person to a chair, place her hand on the back of the chair. She'll do the rest. When dining out, offer to read the menu, including the prices. Describe the location of the food by using clock numbers as reference points (fish at 12 o'clock, potatoes at 3 o'clock, and so on). Ask if she needs assistance with her food.
- Feel free to talk about visual entertainment, such as sports, television, and movies. Blind people have the same interests as sighted people. If you include them, everyone will have a better time.

- Don't move personal items or rearrange furniture. A blind person does not see changes in his surroundings, and the result can be injury. Doors should be fully opened or fully closed. That goes for cabinet and closet doors as well.
- Lighting may be the most important factor in adapting the living space for people with low vision, and most changes are usually inexpensive. Keep lighting as uniform as possible from room to room to avoid shadows and changing light levels. Lower wattage bulbs, 3-way bulbs, and dimmer switches are often helpful.
- Use contrasting colors to assist people who are partially sighted. With a light tablecloth, for example, use dark plates to maximize contrast. In the bathroom, try dark soap on a white sink or tub. Use bright red or yellow tape on steps and door frames. You get the idea...
- Glare and poor lighting blur edges. Shiny surfaces such as linoleum and glossy paints add to the problem of glare. Go for matte paints and non-shiny surfaces. You might want brighter walls for extra light, and a runner down the hallway for improved contrast.
- On steps and stairways, lighting is critical. Eliminate glares and shadows. Keep top and bottom areas well-lighted (most falls occur on the top step). Brightly colored tape can be used to highlight edges, with a contrasting color for the landings.
- Mark stoves and other appliances with bright, tactual markings (available for less than a dollar at most arts and craft stores, under the name Polymarks). On your appliance, put one drop on the stationary setting above the dial, then put a drop on each desired setting on the dial itself. Simply align tactual marks to get the correct appliance setting.

As you can see, it's easy. When you meet someone who is blind or visually impaired, be yourself, use common sense, and just let the rest happen.

If you have any questions or know someone who needs assistance, please call ASB's Intake Department at (215) 627-0600. We'll be glad to help.



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