



Courtesy Guide for Interacting with a Person who is Blind or Visually Impaired

Individuals who are blind or visually impaired can do most of the same things as people who are sighted but may do them differently. You should have the same expectations for someone who is blind or visually impaired as you would for anyone else. When vision is lost, individuals learn to use their remaining senses to obtain information from the environment. Their hearing, touch and smell do not become “superhuman” and doing everyday tasks differently shouldn’t be perceived as “amazing.”

The following simple guidelines and techniques will show courtesy to someone who is blind or visually impaired when you are interacting with the person.

Introduce Yourself

When you join a conversation or meet someone, greet the person by sharing your name. The person may know you and your voice, but it’s polite to share so the person isn’t uncertain. When you leave the group or the person, let the person know this too, so the individual isn’t left speaking to an empty room or chair. Examples: “Hi, Brian, it’s Frank.” And “Brian, I’m headed back to my office. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

You may also share your name when in large meetings or a Zoom session. Identify yourself as the speaker before sharing your thought or question so the person knows it was you. Example: “It’s Tanya. Will there be another meeting before the deadline?”

Offer Assistance First

You may offer assistance to someone who is blind or visually impaired, but always ask if it’s needed or wanted first. The individual will let you know. **Never** touch, push or pull an individual without permission since this could be startling and disorienting.

Communicate Directly with the Person

Speak directly to the individual rather than through a companion. People who are blind or visually impaired will know if they want “soup or salad,” how

they want an entrée prepared, or if they want to purchase the three- or five-year warranty on a product.

Use Words Like “Look,” “See” and “Watch” Without Discomfort

It is perfectly fine to use the same verbiage with a visually impaired or blind individual as you would with someone who is fully sighted. For example, continue to use phrasing such as “Nice to see you, John!” or “Did you watch the game last night?”

Allow the Person to Use a Long White Cane

Individuals who are blind or visually impaired may benefit from using a long white cane to assist with maintaining safety when traveling. The long white cane assists with locating drop-offs and surface changes and detecting obstacles. It also identifies the user to the public as having a visual impairment. Many long cane users may have some remaining vision and find using a long cane beneficial for both detection and identification. The long white cane should never be taken from the person who is using it.

Let the Guide Dog Do Its Job

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a blind person is guaranteed the right to be accompanied by a guide dog in places serving the public. These include restaurants, grocery and retail stores, government offices, schools, hospitals, places of employment and worship. Public transportation and ridesharing services such as Uber or Lyft must permit a blind person and guide dog under this law.

Guide dogs are well-trained and are working when they are in harness. Do not make eye contact, offer food, touch/pet or speak to the dog while it is working. Doing so may distract the dog and create an unsafe situation for the individual who is being guided.

Speak in a Normal Voice

Speak in a normal voice to the person unless you know the individual has a hearing impairment.

Become a Human Guide

If you'd like to offer to physically guide an individual, ask if the person wants your help first. If your assistance is accepted, allow the person to grasp your arm just above the elbow. This will place your body one-half step ahead of the person you are guiding. Walking at a normal pace will feel comfortable

and allows the person to respond to your own movements, stopping and starting when you do. If you encounter a narrow space or hallway, bring your arm behind your back, signaling the person you are guiding to walk behind you, single file. Let the person know if a door is on the right or left when going through the entryway and if it opens toward or away from you. When approaching stairs, tell the person if the stairs are going up or down and which side the handrail is on.

Give Informative Directions

When giving directions to someone who is blind or visually impaired, avoid using terms like “over there” or pointing to give direction. Use directional terms and clear language, such as “It’s the third door on your left.” Be sure to use the individual’s left and right, not yours, if you are facing them. You may also refer to a clockface’s orientation when orienting to a new space, such as “The table is at 3 o’clock and the couch is at 7 o’clock.”

Avoid Unnecessary Hazards

Reduce the risk of injury in shared spaces by eliminating the following hazards:

- Half-open doors
- Open cabinet doors and drawers
- Chairs that are not pushed in
- Rugs that are not secured to the floor
- Cords across walkways
- Hanging plants
- Footstools

Leave things in place

Do not move furniture, desks or frequently accessed items without letting the individual who is blind know. When rooms are rearranged or items are moved, the individual will have to reestablish orientation to the area. Remember to give clear and precise information regarding the items relocated.