

Vision Loss Etiquette 101

So you've just met someone with vision loss – perhaps at work, through a friend or out in the community. It's only natural to feel unsure about how to behave and to want to avoid doing something inappropriate. Here are a few simple tips to help you be more comfortable and supportive around a person with vision loss.

The first thing you need to keep in mind is that people with vision loss are only different from the rest of us with respect to their vision. They have interests, thoughts and feelings and do most of the same things all of us do, from shovelling snow to playing sports to doing crosswords (they may just do them a bit differently).

In fact, people with vision loss often find other people's beliefs about their abilities to be a much a bigger barrier than vision loss itself.

If you know this, you've already gone a long way towards a better understanding of how someone with vision loss might like to be treated. But here are some tips for specific situations.

Introductions

- When being introduced to someone with vision loss, say hello and wait for them to offer their hand to be shaken. When introducing yourself, simply say something such as “Hi, my name is Michael Somers. Great to meet you. Let's shake hands.”
- Speak clearly using your natural voice and volume.

Day-to-day situations

- Try to avoid asking questions about how the person lost their vision. It can be very frustrating for a person with vision loss to have to explain their situation over and over again.
- Use everyday language. Don't worry about using terms such as “see” and “look” when talking about your favourite TV show or the latest blockbuster flick. People with vision loss use these terms (and watch TV and go to the movies) too.
- Always identify yourself by name. For example. “Hi Lucy; it's David.” Don't assume that the person will recognize your voice. After all, that person might be meeting dozens of people in a day. Unless you are a



very close friend, they will need to know who you are each time you come across them.

- If the person has a guide dog, do not pet it while it is in harness (as tempting as this may be!). Guide dogs are working animals, and distracting them can be hazardous for the people they are guiding. If the dog is out of its harness, you can ask its handler for permission to pat it, but be prepared to respect the answer either way.
- If you are visiting the home of a person with vision loss, remember to put things back exactly as you found them. Moving things around without letting the person know may cause unnecessary inconvenience or accidents. You should also close cupboards after you use them, and leave doors all the way open or closed. A half-open door can be dangerous.

Offering assistance



- Ask first before you read aloud any printed material, or offer assistance of any kind. This will avoid unwanted over-protectiveness. Remember to be discreet and maintain the confidentiality and dignity of the person with vision loss. But do offer assistance if you think it is needed. For example, if you go into a restaurant or café, many people with vision loss may appreciate an offer to read a menu to them if none are available in their format of choice.
- If you run into someone with vision loss on the street, assess the situation before offering help. If they are walking along confidently, chances are they do not need help. But if they look unsure, do not

hesitate to offer assistance. Check out [Guiding Someone with Vision Loss](#) to learn more.

- If you are giving directions, don't say things like "It's over there." Be as specific as you can. Try "the second door on your right, about twenty feet down the hallway" or "that store is located north in the direction you're already going, about two blocks away."
- If you are a friend or family member of someone newly diagnosed with vision loss, that person may appreciate an offer to help adjust their home or another environment so it better fits their needs. They may, for example, appreciate your help installing extra lighting, securing carpets or rearranging furniture. Consult with the person who has vision loss and decide together how things should be organized, labelled or adapted. You can also contact CNIB for assistance, or read [I Can't See as Well as I Used To](#).

In the workplace

- If you are handing out materials in a meeting, make sure you have copies available for someone with vision loss in their preferred format. If this is not possible, send the person your materials well in advance electronically. When in doubt, ask the person what they need and when they need it in order to participate.
- If any presentations are taking place (videos, PowerPoint's, etc.), the presenter should describe what is on the screen, blackboard or flipchart for the benefit of a participant with vision loss.
- For more information, see [Making Meetings and Seminars Accessible](#).

Social situations

- Be inclusive. Initiating visits and including a family member or acquaintance who has vision loss in your regular events and activities – such as going for a night on the town – demonstrates that you see them as a valued person with interests first. Just because someone has vision loss doesn't mean that they can't participate – and be the life of the party!
- At an event or social gathering, let someone who has vision loss know when someone else has entered a room or circle of conversation. You should also tell them when you are leaving a conversation or room. Not only is this the polite thing to do, it will also avoid having the person tell an amazing story to... the wall.

- Take the time to help someone with vision loss mingle by offering to connect them to people they may know or introduce them to new people in a social gathering.
- If you are talking one-on-one with a person with vision loss, never leave them stranded. If you have to leave, introduce them to someone else, or offer to guide them to a reference point, such as a seating area or even a wall so they know where they are.
- If you are having lunch or dinner with someone with vision loss, use the clock method to describe where certain foods are located on a plate when dinner arrives. For example, “Jim, your rice is at three o'clock and your steak is at seven o'clock.”
- In fact, most people with significant vision loss will appreciate it if you describe points of interest in the surroundings.

Sighted Guide Techniques

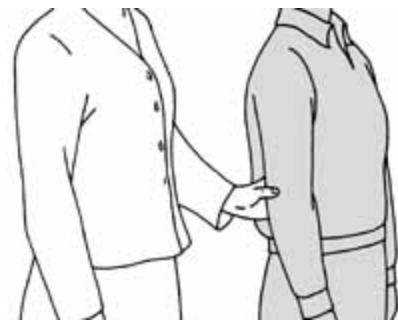


Getting started

Ask the person if they need assistance. If they do need assistance, contact the back of their hand with the back of of yours.



They can then hold your arm just above the elbow.



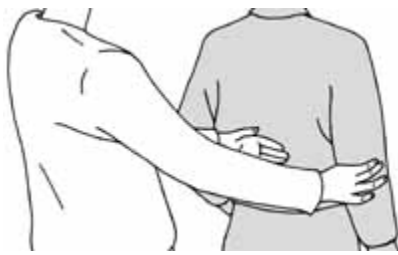
Walking

When you start walking, make sure the person is half a step behind you and slightly to the side. Walk at a pace that is comfortable for both of you. Look ahead for obstacles at foot level, head height and to the side.



Narrow spaces

Tell the person you are guiding that a narrow space is ahead. Move your guiding arm towards the center of your back to indicate that they need to walk behind you. The person should step in behind you while still holding your arm. When you have passed through the narrow space bring your arm back to its usual position by your side.



Changing sides

If you need to change sides with the person you are guiding it is important they do not lose contact with you. This is easiest to achieve if you remain stationary. Allow the person to hold your guiding arm with both of their hands. They can then move one hand to reach your other arm without losing contact.



Doorways

When passing through a doorway, ensure the person who is blind or vision impaired is on the hinged side of the door. As you get close to the door, explain which way it opens. Open the door and walk through, allowing the person you are guiding to catch the door using their free hand.



Steps and staircases

Stop at the first step and tell the person you are guiding whether the steps go up or down. Change sides if necessary to ensure the person you are guiding can use the handrail. Start walking when the person is ready, remaining one step ahead of them. Stop when you reach the end of the stairs and tell the person you are at the top or bottom.

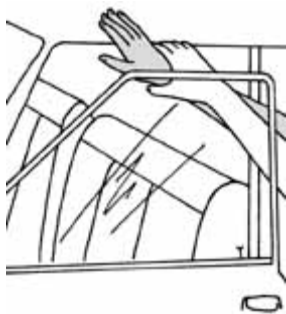


Seating

Explain which way the chair is facing and where it is placed in relation to the rest of the room. Then walk up and place your guiding arm on the chair and explain which part of the chair you are touching. The person you are guiding can then move their hand down your arm to locate the chair to seat themselves.

Getting into a car

Tell the person you are guiding which way the car is facing and which door they will be getting into. Place your guiding arm onto the door handle and ask the person to move their hand down your arm. Allow the person being guided to open the door, seat themselves, and close the door.



If it is necessary and/or the car is unfamiliar to them, place your arm inside on the roof so they can follow it and avoid bumping their head. Once seated, allow the person to close the car door.

Reversing Direction

This procedure is used to complete a 180-degree turn in a limited space, such as an elevator. Also called an “about-face” turn, the guide and person being guided turn and face each other. The person being guided lets go of the guide’s elbow and then re-establishes contact by taking hold of the guide’s opposite elbow. The team then completes the turn to face the opposite direction they were originally walking.

Parting Ways

When parting you should inform the person being guided your intention to leave and ensure that the person is left in contact with a tangible object in the environment (e.g., a wall, a table, a chair). This will eliminate the uncomfortable feeling of standing alone in an open space and not having a reference point.