

## What to Do When You Meet a Blind Person

**Every person is unique** and therefore reacts in a unique way to blindness or visual impairment. A person who is blind or visually impaired, whether totally blind or has some degree of useful vision, may at times require assistance. Do not assume that this person does not know how to do something until you have asked if he/she needs help.

**Visual impairment can take many forms** that may be confusing to you. Some people can see well enough to read, yet their vision does not allow them the ability to identify a friend sitting across the room or find their way around a parking lot. It is all right to ask them about their impairment. Most people welcome the opportunity to help others understand vision loss better. Those who don't like to talk about their condition will soon let you know by the tone of their short answers. Almost all persons who are visually impaired have difficulty adapting to lighting changes. Going in and out of buildings or shadows can momentarily increase their impairment.

### **When I come into a room or an area and a blind person is alone, what should I do?**

Start the conversation by identifying yourself and use a normal tone of voice. Introduce him/her to anyone else with you, do not leave out children. Be natural, be yourself and show warmth and sincerity. Tell them when you are leaving the room or area.

### **How do I best talk with a blind person?**

Always talk directly to him/her, (not through a companion, if present). There is no need to raise your voice. Use normal, natural expressions. Find common interests. He/she too watches TV, visits with friends, and goes places. They do the same things as you, but sometimes use different techniques.

### **How can I help a blind person feel more comfortable in an unfamiliar setting?**

Be brief and descriptive. 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. For example, you can describe the layout of a room, whether it is square or narrow, how many tables and chairs there are and how they are arranged. Pointing or using phrases such as "over there" will be of no assistance.

Establish a point of contact for them when leaving their immediate presence. When you are acting as a guide, never leave the person in "free space". When walking, always be sure that the person has a firm grasp on your arm. If you have to be separated briefly, be sure the person is in contact with a wall, railing, or some other stable object until you return.

### **How can I help a blind person take a seat?**

Say "May I place your hand on the back of the chair?" Place the hand of your guiding arm on the seat or the back of the chair. The person you are guiding will find the seat by following along your arm. Tell the person what type of chair it is, e.g. armchair, bench, rocking chair, etc. They will be able to seat themselves or will ask if they need help.

### **How do I help a blind person cross the street or give assistance in other areas?**

Avoid pulling the person by the hand or tugging at their sleeves. They will hold your arm just above the elbow. The individual stands next to the sighted guide and one-half step behind. The sighted guide's arm is relaxed and down at his/her side. The motion of your body will tell them what to do. Set a comfortable pace for both of you. Let them know when you are coming to a curb and whether you will be stepping up or down. When the terrain is irregular, alert the person in advance, e.g. stepping from concrete to grass, concrete to gravel, etc. Try to give specific information, but only as much as needed – too much information can be confusing.

### **What do I do if we come to a doorway?**

You should tell the person when they are approaching a door and in which direction the door opens. For example, say, "The door opens to the left and towards us". In this case, the person would then free their left hand in order to hold the door and to close it.

### **How do we maneuver the stairs?**

Say "We are going to walk up or down stairs". Stairs are approached squarely, never at an angle. Come to a full stop before the stairs. If possible, the person takes hold of the handrail and finds the first step, steps down or up one step and then both proceed together in rhythm, the sighted guide always one step ahead. Stop at the end of the stairs and also say "Last step".

### **What do I do if a person has a dog guide?**

The dog is a working dog, not a pet. Do not divert the dog's attention – his master's life depends on its alertness. When giving directions, deal directly with the person, not the dog.

### **What do I do if I eat with a blind person in the restaurant?**

It is helpful to identify what is on the table, i.e., a glass of water, flowers. Ask if you should read the menu and the prices. When their food order arrives, use the image of the hands on a clock and tell where each food item is on the plate.