



Etiquette for Interacting with Individuals who are Blind or Have Low Vision

Since every individual with vision loss has different needs and boundaries, these are basic guidelines for interacting appropriately.

Identify yourself

When approaching an individual with vision loss, initiate a greeting by identifying yourself. However, if you know the person, you may simply say hi "person's name" this is "give your name." When leaving the room, announce that you are leaving the room.

Respect personal boundaries

Respect personal space. Do not physically touch an individual with visual loss unless you know it is acceptable.

Talk directly to those with vision loss

Speak directly to the individual not through their companion(s).

Ask the individual if your assistance is needed

Although many individuals with vision loss are comfortable traveling independently some may appreciate your assistance. If they need assistance, they will ask for your assistance or accept your offer to help. Ask how they prefer to be guided - offer an arm or your shoulder. They will grasp your arm just above your elbow or the back of your shoulder. Do not pull or push the person. Before approaching obstacles or unusual terrain, stop walking and describe the situation ahead of them. After arriving at a destination, describing surroundings, size of room, door location in detail, will help them acclimate. If a person has a walker, hold the front of their walker, and walk at a pace comfortable to the individual.

If someone needs assistance sitting in a chair, show them to their chair by asking to take their hand and placing it on the back of the chair. This will allow them to seat themselves. If they need assistance with a meal, they may ask for the menu to be read aloud or ask for the position of their plate, food, or drink. Always give directions as clearly as possible. Words like "left" and "right" are most helpful, especially when the directions reflect the way the person is facing.

Be verbally descriptive when giving directions

Avoid using visually oriented references such as "Over there near the plant." Also, describe things from the individual's perspective, not yours. Support your facial expressions or visual cues with verbal cues.

Etiquette Cont.

Be respectful and assume nothing

The most important thing to remember in any conversation with someone with disability is to assume nothing. When questioning people about a disability, be respectful. Keep in mind this is personal information. If you have a question about what to do, what language or terminology to use, or what assistance, may be needed, the person with the disability should be your first and best resource. Do not be afraid to ask.

Promote a safe environment

If you work or live with someone who has a visual impairment, be mindful of potential hazards. Please keep hallways clear of clutter and doors should be fully open or closed not halfway open or shut. When moving furniture, inform people with visual loss of the change especially if it will affect them when navigating the space. Tell them when you bring new items into their environment, describe what the items are, and where you put them from their perspective. Do not move anything (furniture, personal items, and most importantly, their white cane) without telling them.

Avoid actions that may distract service animals/guide dogs while they are working

It's important to remember they are not pets; they are working dogs. Avoid anything which may divert the dog's attention, such as petting, touching, taking their harness, or calling the dog.

Patience

Patience with the individual with vision loss and with yourself is essential.

Don't condescend

The words "blind" and "visually impaired" are adjectives, not nouns. Instead of saying, "The blind have many resources," say "People who are blind have many resources." Use people-first language. Never use a condescending tone of voice or terminology. Don't say things like "Oh, you poor dear. You are so very brave." Also, refrain from using qualifying statements, such as "She's pretty for a girl who is blind."

It is perfectly acceptable to use phrases like, "See you tomorrow," "Watch out," "Did you see the show on TV last night," and "Look at this." These are part of everyone's common vocabulary and people who have a visual impairment also use these phrases.

Focus on overall goal when conversing with a person with a disability, not the disability

Keep your overall goal in mind during any conversation with a person with a disability. Ultimately, what is communicated, not how it is communicated, is what matters.