

Interacting With a Person Who Is Blind or Visually Impaired

This summary is intended as guidelines for interactions with persons who are blind or are visually impaired. Every person with a disability is an individual, and blindness and visual impairment is a spectrum of vision loss. You should always consider the situation for each individual and ask appropriate questions to determine the current needs. This summary is about disabilities, but you are not working with disabilities, you are working with individuals who have disabilities. With this in mind, consider the following guidelines.

Speaking with a person who is blind or visually impaired:

- Remember to initiate an interaction by identifying yourself using your name. It is inconsiderate to tease by saying such things as, "Do you know who this is?"
- Use verbal clues to let the individual know your intentions. For example, rather than putting your hand out and getting no response, say something like: "Let me shake your hand."
- You should speak directly to the individual, not through a companion. A person who is blind can often tell if you are looking at them when you are speaking, so look at the person directly.
- Use the name of the blind person to get their attention, since you cannot use eye contact to let the blind individual know you are speaking to them.
- Speak in a normal tone of voice and do not raise your voice. It is not uncommon for people to raise their voice when speaking to a person who is blind, but most likely the person who is blind does not have a problem hearing. If he has trouble hearing you, he will let you know.
- Using phrases such as "good to see you" is perfectly acceptable.
- Be sure to verbally let the blind person know who is in a group and tell the blind person when you or someone else leaves.
- Support facial expressions or visual cues with verbal cues. For example, say "yes" when you are nodding your head.
- Remember that a person who is blind cannot find you unless you verbally tell them where you are. They are not being aloof; they simply don't know that you are there.

Offering Assistance:

- Ask if the individual needs assistance and how you can best help. Do not assume incapability. Don't feel awkward if your offer is not accepted.
- If location directions are needed, give specific directions like, "The desk is five feet to your right," as opposed to pointing and saying, "The desk is over there."
- Verbal clues are essential to a person who is blind. Give a word picture when describing things to an individual with vision loss, including such details as color, texture, shape and landmarks.
- When you guide a person who is blind, he will grasp your arm just above your elbow and lag half a step behind you. Move your guiding arm behind your back when approaching a narrow space so the person you are guiding can step behind you and follow in a single file.
- Hesitate briefly at a curb or at the beginning of a flight of stairs and tell the person you are guiding whether the steps go up or down.
- You should allow the person you are guiding to find the handrail and locate the edge of the first step before proceeding.
- You should not grab the person you are guiding by the hand, arm, or shoulder and try to steer him.
- You should not grab the person's cane or the handle of a dog guide's harness.
- If someone needs assistance in taking his seat, show him to his chair by putting his hand on the back of the chair. He will be able to seat himself easily.

Interacting with people who are blind or visually impaired using a white cane:

- Use of a white cane when walking is a common aid for people who are blind. Speaking will help orient the individual to your location.
- The white cane can create a barrier between you and the person using it. Make an effort to avoid this by speaking to the person using the white cane rather than simply trying to stay out of the way.
- Remember that the white cane alerts the individual to changes in the elevation of the walking path, and to find such things as the edges of pavement, walls and corners. The person using a white cane may need your help in identifying the location of things in a new or changing environment. You can then serve as "sighted guide" as described previously.

Interacting with a person using a guide dog:

- Speak directly to the person using the guide dog with no initial reference to the dog. After establishing a conversation, you may ask questions about the guide dog.
- When guiding a person using a guide dog, the person may have the guide dog follow you, or he may drop the dog harness, and you can then serve as “sighted guide” as described above.
- You should give any needed instructions to the person, not to the guide dog.
- It is essential that the guide dog maintains focus in order to provide safe guidance. This means you should not do anything that would distract the dog’s attention, such as calling the dog, touching the dog’s harness, petting or feeding the dog. The decision about what interaction you should have with the dog is up to the guide dog user, so if you have questions, ask.