
Vision loss - offering assistance

Summary

- Don't assume you know what a person who is blind or has low vision needs – ask them first.
 - Describe your surroundings.
 - Use light touch to help communicate your message.
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When you meet a person who is blind or has low vision, the first and best thing you can do is introduce yourself and ask the person questions. Ask them if they would like help and, if they say 'yes', ask how you can help them. There are many different types of blindness and low vision, so don't assume that you know what the person needs.

Ask if you can help

When you first meet a person who is blind or has low vision, introduce yourself. If you would like to shake hands, lightly touch their hand. Then they can shake hands with you if they choose. You can then ask the person if they want help and, if they do, how you can help them.

Most people with severe vision loss are not totally blind. Some will have side vision; others might be able to see what is in front of them but not what is immediately to their left or right. The person you meet might have had low vision for many years and feel quite confident in the setting they are in. Others might have recently experienced vision loss and may still be learning to move about safely and with confidence. Even if the person uses a cane or has a guide dog (also known as a seeing eye dog), they might still appreciate your help.

Don't assume someone needs help

Many people make the mistake of simply grabbing a person who is blind or has low vision by the arm and taking them across a road, through a doorway or into a car. This is not necessary and might upset or offend the person.

The person may also have hearing loss

Allow for the possibility, especially if the person is older, that they might also have hearing loss. If they do, talk to them in quieter areas and, if they wear a hearing aid, walk on that side of them.

Walking

If the person has asked for your help to get somewhere, brush your hand against theirs and they will take hold of your arm. Walk slightly ahead of the person and alert them to hazards, such as uneven ground and steps.

Describe the surroundings

Depending on the situation, many people who are blind or have low vision appreciate a description of their surroundings. If you are outside, describe what you see around you. If you are inside, describe the building – its size and furnishings and so on.

Other ways to help

Here are some other tips for assisting people who are blind or have low vision:

- **Always be close by** – don't leave the person in a situation where they could become disoriented.
 - **Meetings** – if you are at a meeting with a person who is blind or has low vision, tell them who else is there. A good policy for conducting meetings is to hold an informal roll call of people who are there.
 - **Visual displays** – if visual displays are used at a meeting, describe them to the person. If handout material is used, it should be provided to the person in braille or audio format or emailed directly to them prior to the presentation. Some people who are blind or have low vision use screen readers, which verbally read information from a computer screen.
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- **Eating** – when you have a meal with a person who is blind or has low vision, ask if they would like you to describe what is on their plate. Start in a clock formation: for example, chicken is at six o'clock, potatoes at 12 o'clock. You should also tell them where their glass is and ask if they would like condiments, such as salt and pepper.
- **Toilets** – ask the person if they know where the toilets are and if they need assistance at any stage to get there.

Where to get help

- Vision loss organisations
- **Vision Australia**, and Low Vision Services Tel. 1300 84 74 66

Things to remember

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- Describe your surroundings.
- Use light touch to help communicate your message.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Vision Australia

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