

CCB Recommended Guidelines for Interaction with a Blind or Visually Impaired Person

The following points of etiquette are helpful to keep in mind when interacting with a person who is blind or visually impaired.

Sizing Up the Situation

Be aware that blindness/vision impairment runs the gamut from the total inability to see to vision that is quite functional in many situations. A large majority, about 80% of the "legally blind" population, have some vision. You cannot easily determine how much or what an individual can see. Not every person with a white cane is totally blind but may be using the cane to supplement low vision. A totally blind person will probably swing and tap a white cane with each step. A person with low vision may carry the cane folded or unfolded and use it only for specific situations such as detecting curbs and steps. Similarly, a person's apparent ability to navigate visually doesn't necessarily mean that he/she can recognize faces or determine in which direction or at which object you are pointing. Finally, even the use of a guide dog does not indicate that the person is totally blind.

Making Contact

Identify yourself. Don't play guessing games, such as "Do you know who I am?" Introduce yourself using your name and/or position, especially if you are wearing a name badge containing this information, or if you are a uniformed police officer or fire fighter.

Speak directly to a person who is blind or visually impaired, not through a companion, guide, or other individual. Speak using a natural conversational tone and speed. It is not necessary or helpful to speak loudly and slowly unless the person also has a hearing impairment. Address a person who is blind or visually impaired by name when possible. This is especially important in crowded areas. A light touch on the person's arm may also be used to indicate whom you are addressing.

Immediately greet persons who are blind or visually impaired when they enter a room or a service area. This allows you to let them know you are present and ready to assist, and it eliminates uncomfortable silences. When offering assistance, simply ask, "May I be of help?"

When you have been in conversation with a person who is blind or visually impaired, indicate your departure from the room or the area to avoid the embarrassment of leaving a person speaking when no one is actually there. A guide dog is a working dog, a mobility tool, not a pet. Do not pet, feed, or distract a guide dog while it is working. The handler's life depends on the dog's alertness.

Making Conversation

Feel free to use words that refer to vision during conversations with persons who are blind or visually impaired. Vision-oriented words such as look, see, and watching TV are a part of everyday verbal communication. The words blind and visually impaired are also acceptable in conversation. Feel free to use visually descriptive language. Referring to colors, patterns, designs, and shapes is perfectly acceptable.

The use of "People First" language is preferred by many people with disabilities. Thus, speak about a person with a disability by first referring to the person and then to the disability, e.g., "persons who are blind" rather than "blind persons."

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Be precise and thorough when you describe people, places, or things to persons who are blind. Don't leave things out or change a description because you think it is unimportant or unpleasant.

When giving directions, don't point to or describe landmarks. Use terms such as left, right, front and back. Be specific about the number of blocks or streets: don't assume the person can read street signs or building numbers.

Offering Guidance

Offer to guide a person who is blind or visually impaired by asking if he/she would like assistance. Offer your arm. It is not always necessary to provide guidance; in some instances it can be disorienting and disruptive. Respect the desires of the person. The most important rule of courtesy is to respect the person's privacy and independence. Guide persons who request assistance by allowing them to take your arm just above the elbow. Walk ahead of the person you are guiding. Pause at the edge of a curb or stairs before proceeding. Never grab a person who is blind or visually impaired by the arm or cane and push him/her forward.

Do not leave a person who is blind or visually impaired standing in "free space" when you serve as a guide. Always be sure that the person you guide has a firm grasp on your arm or is in contact with a chair or a wall if you must be separated momentarily. Show a person who is blind to a chair by putting the person's hand on the back of the chair.

Be calm and clear about what to do if you see a person who is blind or visually impaired about to encounter a dangerous situation. In such cases courtesy becomes less important than safety. A specific instruction such as "Stop!" is more helpful than "Look out!" And speaking of safety, there are rules that should be followed in all instances, though they take on more importance where people with vision impairments are concerned. At home, school, or work never leave a door ajar. Keep corridors and stairs clear of clutter.

Restaurants, etc.

Offer to read the menu including the price of each item. It works well to read the categories first and then read a category in more detail on request. As food is served ask a person who is blind or visually impaired if he/she would like to be told the position of the food on the plate. If he/she wants you to cut the food or serve it from a casserole, he/she will request that help. It is never bad form to offer, however. In a buffet situation, some people will prefer that you bring food to the table while others will want to accompany you to the buffet line and make choices as you go along.

When making change in bills of more than one denomination, hand the bills separated by denomination, e.g., present and identify the ten-dollar bills, then the fives, then the ones. This is not necessary with coins; they can be distinguished by touch.

(RDP 07-03) Reprinted in part from factsheet "Sensitivity to People who are Visually Impaired," Published on www.afb.org,

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