

Ms. & Mr. Manners Meet a Visually Impaired Person
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Ms. & Mr. Manners offer the following tips when meeting a person with a visual impairment:

MOST IMPORTANT: ask the person with a visual impairment about their preferences.

General Suggestions

There are no universally acceptable labels.

- The word “blind” is usually OK, if you know that the person is totally blind.
- “Legally blind” means at best 20/200 clarity or a field of vision of at most 20 degrees.
- The term “person with a visual impairment” is widely considered respectful.
- Honor the person’s preferences.
- If you accidentally offend the person, just apologize.

No pity!

- A person who recently lost vision may be depressed. You can empathize, but understand that the person can learn new skills to go about their everyday lives.
- Most people don’t want to be considered “brave” for living with a visual impairment.

If a person jokes about her/his visual impairment, it’s OK to laugh.

- Don’t initiate such a joke unless you know the person well enough to be sure it’s OK.

Assume competence, not incompetence.

- Different people have different levels of independence.
- Many people develop adaptations to go about their daily activities with minimal help.
- Let the person describe to you specifically what you can do to help.

Treat each person as an individual.

- The accommodations needed, preferred, and used vary from person to person.

Addressing the Person

Get the person’s attention before conversing.

- Start talking when approaching near the person, while respecting personal space.
- Use the person’s name if you know it.
- If you don’t know the person’s name, try, “Excuse me,” or “Hello”.

Identify yourself by name.

- Skip your name only if you know that the person already knows you by voice.

Shake hands when meeting the person for the first time.

- If the person does not extend her/his hand first, tell them you’d like to shake their hand.

- Wait until the person extends a hand before trying to shake it.

Talk directly to the person.

- Most likely the person is capable of talking for herself/himself.
- Don't try to talk to the person through the person's companion or assistant. If the person needs help from an assistant, the person will ask the assistant or the assistant will take the initiative.

Use a normal voice volume and tone, unless you know of a hearing impairment.

- Most visually impaired people have normal hearing, but some do not.
- Difficulties with hearing can affect people at any age.

Try to make eye contact, even if the person does not look back at you.

- Even a totally blind person may be able to hear when you are looking away.
- The person will hear you less clearly if you look down.
- Don't be insulted or assume the person doesn't make eye contact.
 - People with a loss of central vision or hearing problem may look at you sideways. It's not rude--they just see or hear you best that way.
- Don't assume they can see you if they are looking straight at you.
 - Some totally blind people have learned to appear to "make eye contact", to be polite.

Verbalize everything you intend to communicate.

- The person may or may not detect your facial expressions or gestures (like pointing or smiling).

Use natural language.

- Usually you don't have to avoid expressions relating to vision, like "Do you want to see this?"
 - The person will probably notice if you struggle to find a politically correct phrase.
 - Natural substitutions are useful, ("Check this out" instead of "Look at this".)
- Honor the person's preferences.
- If you accidentally offend the person, just apologize.

Tell the person when you are leaving her/him.

- It's embarrassing to be left talking to thin air.

Giving Directions

Be specific.

- If you are unsure, let the person know, so they know to verify with someone else.
- Use directions based on which direction the person is facing. ("It's to your right/left.")
- You can try clock-face directions. Straight ahead is 12 o'clock. Not everyone uses them.
- You can try cardinal directions (North, South, East, West). Not everyone uses them.
- Estimate the distance by inches, feet, yards. Most people don't count steps.
- State the number of blocks to walk, if you know it.

- Pointing is rarely effective unless you also use specific words.

Guiding the Person

Let the person take your arm.

- The person may prefer one side and may request it.
- Most often the person will prefer to be guided from the side without the cane or dog.
- A dog guide user may direct the dog to follow you or may want to take your arm.
- Warn the person before making contact.
- Touch the person's hand with your hand or arm.
- The person will take your arm.
- A small child may take your wrist instead of your arm.
- For a very small child, extend your pointer finger and middle finger straight down for the child to hold.
- Don't pull or push the person.
- You don't have to tell the person the direction of turns—the person will feel them.
- Chat and/or describe what's around and what's happening.

Keep your arm relaxed at your side.

- People with balance problems may prefer your arm bent arm and may hold your forearm for support.

Walk at a normal pace.

- Seniors or people with orthopedic impairments may need you to walk slower.

Stepping up, down, or over things.

- Stop anywhere the person has to step up, down, or over, and tell the person why you're stopping.
 - Take the step, then wait for the person to step up/down/over before continuing.

Tell the person when you're done guiding. Like "We're here", or any equivalent phrase.

Handing Over Objects

Tell the person that you are giving her/him the object and name it.

- Like, "Here's your notebook."

After the person puts her/his hand out, place the item in the hand.

- If you hold the object out first, the person may have to grope to find it.

Ms./Mr. Manners sometimes makes mistakes. Just apologize and move on.