



Etiquette for Working and Socializing with People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired



The Chicago
Lighthouse



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This guide provides information and some simple techniques that will teach you what to do when meeting and interacting with a person who is partially or completely blind.

Blindness can affect anyone. In fact, the longer our life expectancy, the more likely we are to outlive our vision. Most people will have to adapt to some form of serious vision loss at some stage in their lives. Some people must adapt sooner than others because of injury, disease or other causes.

It is important for those of us who are sighted to recognize that individuals who have serious vision loss or blindness function independently at varying degrees. They may or may not need your assistance or guidance – but it never hurts to ask!

Q: How do I best talk with a blind person?

A: As you would with anyone else! When offering assistance to a person with a visual impairment, be respectful and polite. Too often well-meaning people will “speak down” to someone who is blind and treat them differently than a sighted person. Talk as you would to any other person.

Speak directly to him or her and never through a companion, if one is present

There is no need to raise your voice. Use normal, natural expressions. Try to find common interests. He or she watches TV too, visits with friends and visits different places.

Most importantly, just be yourself.



Q: How do I approach a blind person who may need assistance?

A: If you feel someone needs assistance, don't hesitate to ask if you can be of help. Some people may be unwilling to accept, but many will still be grateful.

When a blind person needs guidance, offer your arm as a method of guiding him or her which way they must go.

Allow the person to grasp your arm, just above the elbow.

Do not push him or her ahead of you. Remember, you are guiding them, not the other way around.

Walk a half-step ahead of them and kindly let the person know if you are approaching a step or an obstacle.

Set a comfortable pace for both of you.

Never grab, shove or push someone without alerting them of your intention. It is offensive as well as dangerous.

Remember to state "on your left" or "on your right" as needed.

Q: How do you assist someone who is blind in maneuvering stairs?

A: Say, "We are going to walk up or down stairs." Stairs are approached squarely and never at an angle.

Offer to indicate where the handrail is located and ask if they would like assistance in ascending or descending the stairs.

Come to a full stop before the stairs. Let the person know you are approaching the top or bottom. As always, stay a full-step ahead at all times.

If possible, allow them to grasp the handrail. Always stay one step ahead and remember to let them know when they have reached the end.

Q: How do you interact with someone who is blind accompanied by a guide dog?

A: If he/she is accompanied by a service animal, remember that it is a working animal.

Never pet, talk to, or feed a service animal without asking the owner first and do not feel insulted if permission is refused.

Service animals are working! Do not divert the animal's attention as its alertness is critical for its companion's safety.

In general, try to minimize physical contact with a working animal.

Q: When I come into an area and a blind person is alone, what should I do?

A: Start the conversation by identifying yourself and use a normal tone of voice.

Introduce him or her to anyone else with you, be natural, be yourself and be warm and inviting.

Be sure to let them know when you are leaving the room or area, especially in a noisy or crowded environment.



Q: How to I best interact with a blind person in a restaurant?

A: It may be helpful to identify objects on the table such as glasses, flowers and utensils.

Politely ask if it would be helpful if you read the menu or the prices. Some restaurants may offer Braille menus - just ask.

If he or she is unaware, let them know when their food arrives and if needed, where everything is on the table. An easy method is to use the "clock method," by indicating where things are as if looking at the hands of a clock. For example, the drink is at 1 o'clock, etc.

Q: How do you interact with people who are deaf-blind?

A: As usual, treat deaf-blind (DB) individuals just as you would anyone else. Do not be condescending or patronizing.

Gently tap his or her shoulder to get their attention.

Address the person directly. One method of communication is print-on-palm (P-O-P). Using the writer's index finger and holding the DB person's hand, palm is sideways between both parties; print capital letters in the palm to spell out words. Some DB individuals may offer their forearm for the P-O-P method to ensure sensitivity.

Do not assume that all DB individuals know sign language. Some will have residual hearing and may speak well.

Describe the things going on around you. Also, remember to describe things which are about to occur.

If a sign language interpreter or a support service provider (SSP) is working with a DB person, direct your conversation to the DB person and not to the interpreter or SSP.

Be sure to let the person know when you enter or leave the area.

We hope that this information will serve as a starting point for comfortably working and socializing with the blind or visually impaired. Just remember to be yourself, be respectful and offer assistance when needed.

In closing, we wanted to share an observation from Bill Jurek, an award-winning Chicago broadcaster who directs The Chicago Lighthouse's CRIS Radio program and hosts the popular public affairs program, "The Beacon."

Bill lost his eye sight in mid life due to a serious health condition he experienced.

"As a person that developed blindness later in life, I found that these tips make life easier for me and less awkward for those in the sighted world. Most of the suggestions are common sense and that is the most important thing to remember. For people that lose their vision later in life, things are very uncomfortable. Sometimes their unfamiliarity with their new world without sight is both frightening and frustrating. It never hurts to offer assistance, but don't be taken aback if that help is refused. Just remember, each person is different and so are their feelings."

This guide is being provided as a courtesy of The Chicago Lighthouse.

If you have any questions about proper etiquette in dealing with people who are blind or visually impaired, please call (312) 997-3662.

Founded in 1906, The Lighthouse is one of the nation's most comprehensive social service agencies. Housed under its roof are the oldest and most prominent vision care and rehabilitation program in the U.S.; a nationally acclaimed school for children with multi-disabilities; a world class employment services program; one of the few remaining clock manufacturing facilities in America; a VA program serving veterans in all 50 states; and a radio station.

