

Step-by-Step

A how-to manual for guiding someone who is blind or partially sighted



CNIB

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Many people with sight loss feel comfortable travelling independently, either while going to work, shopping, banking, or just visiting friends. But there may be times when a sighted guide comes in handy; for example, in crowded situations like office parties or street crossings, in unfamiliar places or if the person has recently lost their sight and are just learning to get around.

Whether you're encountering someone with sight loss as a family member, caregiver, staff person in a nursing home or hospital, or even as a friend or co-worker, this manual will provide you with the skills and confidence to guide someone comfortably, respectfully, and safely.

A few tips before we get started...

Whenever you're guiding someone who is blind or partially sighted, it's important to remember to:

- **Describe your surroundings** (like the size of a room, or positioning of a door) in detail whenever possible to help the person you're guiding better understand their environment.
- **Stop walking before you approach obstacles** or unusual terrain so that you have time to describe them to the person you're guiding.
- **Use a calm, even tone** when describing a situation to reassure the person that you are confident and in control.
- **Speak directly to the person** you're guiding when you're addressing them.
- **Observe the person and be empathetic** if they display any symptoms of nervousness (shaky, jumpy, sweaty hands, fast breathing, etc.). They may need to slow down, take a break or just get more assurance from you that they're in safe hands.



Step 1: Introduction

When approaching a person with sight loss, you should initiate the greeting by identifying yourself. If you already know the person, you can simply say, “Hi Mike, it’s Lucy” or if meeting them for the first time, “Hello there, my name is John.”

Before offering your assistance, you should always ask if it’s needed. If so, gently touch the back of the person’s hand with your own as an indication for them to take your arm. If no assistance is needed, you can simply wish the person a good day and move on.

Step 2: Basic Sighted Guide Technique

The person you’re guiding will take your arm just above the elbow, placing their fingers on the inside of your arm and their thumb on the outside. This is a very natural way for the two of you to be connected.

Never take the person’s arm or hand, or try to push or pull them along. Not only is this considered rude, but it’s less effective in trying to guide someone.

The person you’re guiding may have a preference as to whether they hold your left arm or right arm; either way is fine. Usually, they’ll take the lead and indicate which side they prefer. The person’s grip will typically be firm enough to maintain contact with you, but relaxed enough to be comfortable.





Hold your arm naturally in a straight, relaxed position at your side. The person you're guiding should be at your side about half a step behind you. Position yourself so the shoulder of your guiding arm is aligned directly in front of the shoulder of their grip arm. Their arm will be relaxed, with their elbow bent at about 90 degrees and held close to their body. Try not to stand too close together or too far apart. Too close feels uncomfortable and may make you trip over each other, and too far apart takes up too much space. When moving forward, walk at a normal pace, so the person can follow along comfortably. When approaching any irregularities in terrain, let the person know ahead of time.

Step 3: Providing Additional Support

There may be times when you'll guide someone who needs slightly more support. In this case, you'll want to stay closer together.

The other person may also hold your arm more tightly or even place their arm through yours, resting their hand on top of your forearm for maximum stability. In this case, you should bend your elbow at a 90-degree angle to provide this support.



Step 4: Switching Sides

Sometimes you may need to switch sides, either to open a door, use the handrail on stairways or simply to alternate arms. In the steps below, you'll learn how to switch your guiding arm from your left to your right. If switching from your right to left guiding arm, simply reverse the process.

After indicating the need to switch arms, the person you're guiding will place their left hand on your left arm, directly above where their right hand is positioned. They're now holding onto you with both hands.

Next, they'll release their right hand, while bringing their left hand gently across your back until they connect with your right arm. Their left hand should now be holding onto your right arm, just above your elbow. (You may want to gently extend your bent elbow behind you to make it easier for the person to find.) They can now take a small step over to your right side, and the two of you can resume the normal guiding position.

You may find it easier to first practice this technique while standing still, then again while walking.



Step 5: Narrow Spaces

In spaces where it's awkward to walk side-by-side – such as in narrow pathways, doorways and in crowds – you will need to walk almost directly in front of the person you are guiding.

When approaching a narrow space, cross your guiding arm behind you, so that your arm is now positioned diagonally behind your back. This will indicate to the other person that you're entering a narrower space.

The person you're guiding will then fully extend their gripping arm and step directly behind you. (You may need to give them a verbal cue if they don't move behind you on their own.) You're now walking in single file, one arm's length between you, to prevent the other person from stepping on your heels.

When there's enough space to resume the normal guiding stance, return your arm to its original position. The person you're guiding will understand that they are to return to the standard position, half a pace behind you.





Step 6: Going through Doors

Notify the person you're guiding when you're approaching a door, making sure to describe the type of door and the direction it opens; for example, "We're approaching a large door that opens to the left and inwards." You may need to stop walking so that you have time to describe the door properly before you reach it.

The person with sight loss will switch sides if necessary to ensure they're on the same side as the door's hinges.

If the door isn't already open, it's your responsibility to open the door, but for safety reasons the person you're guiding will hold the door open for themselves. Once you open the door, let them make hand contact with it.

They'll then hold the door open until you have both cleared the doorway and close it if necessary.

If the person you're guiding is unable to control the door - for example, if the person is elderly or if the door is heavy - it becomes your responsibility to hold it open and close it.

Step 7: Stairs and Curbs

Tell the person with sight loss when you're about to climb up and down stairs or curbs.

Approach these squarely - never at an angle - and come to a full stop before you proceed up or down. While stopped, describe the stairs to the person, including the approximate number of stairs, the depth of the steps and the height of the risers. The person can then align their body next to you and use their cane to get a better sense of the size of the step and riser.

To ascend the stairs more safely, the person you're guiding may need to switch to the side with the handrail. You should tell them where the handrail is in relation to their body; for example, "There's a metal handrail on your left." They'll then grasp the handrail and locate the first step by sliding one foot forward until the step is detected.

To begin, you will take the first step onto the first stair, then both of you will proceed together in rhythm. As the guide, you'll always be one step ahead.



Step 8a:

Taking a Seat from the Front

Guide the person directly in front of their seat, until their knees are almost touching it. Let them know that they are in front of a seat, then describe what kind of seat it is; for example, whether it's a couch, bench, rocker, or office chair with wheels. You should also tell them if the chair has arms or any unusual features.

The person you're guiding will examine the seat with one hand to determine its characteristics and check if there's anything on it. Once it's been inspected, they'll turn around and sit down.



Step 8b:

Taking a Seat from the Back

This procedure is used when taking a seat at a table.

Place your own hand on the back of the chair, and tell the person you're guiding that you're standing in front of a chair. Be sure to let them know whether or not the chair is pushed into the table. They'll then move their gripping hand down your arm until they are touching the back of the chair. At this point you should step away slightly so they can locate the table with their free hand. This helps the person you're guiding judge how far to pull the chair out before they sit down.

Finally, ask if they need assistance in taking a seat; for example, pulling out the chair for them if it's pushed in.



Step 8c:

Row Seating

This procedure is used for places such as auditoriums and concert halls.

First, walk in the usual guiding position to the row where the seats are located, and stop at the end of the row. While maintaining the guiding grip, let the person know that you have arrived at their row. You may need to switch sides so that you can enter the row first.

Now, proceed by side-stepping together along the row, turning your bodies as needed so as not to step on the feet of other patrons. Let the person you're guiding know once you've reached their seat. They'll then back up until they feel the seat against the back of their knees before sitting down.

When it's time to leave, you should stand up first and, if necessary, pass in front of the person you're guiding, so that you're in a position to lead them out. They'll grip your arm, and both of you will side-step out together until you are in the aisle.



Step 9: Getting into a Car

Most people with sight loss can get into a car on their own if given proper cues and information.

First, tell the person which direction the vehicle is pointing; for example, “The vehicle is pointing to your left.” Now, place the hand of your guiding arm on the door handle to allow the person to follow down your arm and locate the handle. Then guide their other hand to the roof above the top corner of the door; this is important to help prevent them from bumping their head.

At this point they can now open the door and seat themselves safely into the car. If needed, provide any additional physical assistance or verbal information; for example, with seatbelts, canes, or packages.

Once the person is seated in the car, it’s important to clarify who will close the door. Always ask before closing the door to avoid potential injury.





Step 10: Reversing Direction

This is a simple procedure used to complete a 180-degree (about-face) turn in a limited space, such as an elevator or crowded area.

First, verbally indicate to the person you're guiding that the two of you will need to turn around (face the opposite direction).

The person can then let go of your arm, allowing you both to turn towards each other, and continue turning until you are both facing the opposite direction from where you started.

You can then re-establish contact with the person you're guiding, ensuring the proper grip and position are resumed.

Step 11:

Going Your Separate Ways

When it comes time to leave each other, be sure to tell the other person that you're about to go. A simple closing, such as "Goodbye, John. I'm heading off now!" will usually suffice.

When you leave the other person, make sure they're left at a tangible reference point, such as a wall, facing a particular direction, or even in the company of other people. Not only is this courteous, but it also means they won't be left stranded in an open space talking to someone who's already moved on.



Safety Tips

To make navigation easier and safer for someone with sight loss:



Push chairs into tables when vacating them.



Keep all doors completely open or closed.



Keep cupboard doors closed.

Inform people with sight loss before rearranging any furniture or other objects in their home or office.

Assisting Guide Dog Handlers

As always, first ask the person if they would like some assistance. The person may choose to take your arm with the guide dog accompanying both of you, instruct their dog to follow you as you walk ahead or they may simply ask for directions and proceed on their own.

If they require your assistance, offer your arm by making contact with the back of their hand. The person may have a preference for a particular arm, depending on how they normally position their dog.

If they want to instruct their dog to follow you, walk a few paces ahead and provide verbal directions as you go; for example, “We’re going to be taking the next left.”

The person you’re guiding will provide the necessary instructions for their dog.

If all that’s required are directions, make sure they’re as clear as possible. Use specifics, such as “Turn right at the next corner” instead of vague statements like “Stop over there.”

You should never pet a guide dog unless its owner gives you permission.



Assisting People Who Are Deafblind

Deafblindness is a combination of both hearing and sight loss and affects everyone differently. Many individuals who are deafblind may have some hearing and sight, while others may have none at all.

People who are deafblind use various methods of communication; for example, visual sign language and tactile (touch) communication methods such as print-on-palm or two-hand manual. Each person will have a preferred method of communication, which provides an important source of information about their surroundings. This information helps the person get a sense of where they are and what's around them – a process known as “orientation.”

When acting as a sighted guide for a person who is deafblind, follow the usual sighted guide procedure, but instead of verbally offering your assistance, you can initiate the greeting by lightly touching the person's hand or shoulder. It's important that you maintain contact until your presence is acknowledged. Otherwise, the other person may think your touch was accidental.

A person who is deafblind may indicate how they prefer to communicate in a number of ways. If the person has some degree of hearing, they may respond with “Who are you?” If this happens, identify yourself and offer assistance. The person may also use communication cards, large-print notes, print-on-palm, voice, sign language, tactile finger spelling, or the two-hand manual alphabet to communicate.

If you don't know the method they prefer, try the print-on-palm method, which is both easy to use and generally understood by people who are deafblind. To use this method, print large capital letters onto their palm with the tip of your index finger, pausing between words. A sample introduction can be “HI (pause) I AM JIM (pause) NEED HELP?”

As a guide, it's important to be aware that the other person is unable to hear sounds, sirens, traffic or your voice. To compensate for this, they'll rely on their sense of touch and the movements and direction of their guide. Instead of using words, it may be necessary at times to gently place the person's hand on an object, such as a chair or railing.

Using the Emergency X Technique

The universal sign for an emergency is an X on the back. In an emergency, such as a fire, draw a large X with your finger, covering the person's entire back. This should alert them that they should follow you. You are now their sighted guide and responsible for guiding them to safety. Provide a more detailed explanation if possible once you're both out of danger.

If you're guiding a person who is deafblind, try not to leave them alone. If it's necessary to leave for a few minutes, make sure the person knows where they are and when you'll return. Have them wait in a safe area, such as on a bench or a wall to lean against.





For further information on the sighted guide technique or any aspect of sight loss, contact your local CNIB office or visit **cnib.ca**.

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