

Section: Exceptionalities
Topic: Vision Impairments

This section is to introduce some incorrect perceptions that nondisabled people have toward persons who have visual impairments and the negative attitudes that result. These can be overcome with an increased understanding of the facts.

After completion of the reading and homework assignment, you will know common myths that have created attitudinal barriers toward individuals with vision impairments. You will also be able to give accurate facts about vision impairments.

SENSE ABILITY

INTRODUCTION

What is an attitude? None of us is really sure that an attitude can be measured or identified distinctly. But attitudes result in action, and this we *can* measure. An action can be studied, discussed, and changed. A woman who stares at a blind bus passenger, a clerk who remains quiet behind a counter when a blind shopper approaches, a well-meaning man who insists on helping a blind pedestrian across a busy intersection—all these actions represent negative attitudes toward people who are blind or partially sighted.

Historically, blind people were considered to be exceptional. They were thought to be unclean, evil, contagious, and perverse. As early as the fourth century society shunned them by putting them in institutions. Blind persons were thought to possess strange supernatural powers. They are often portrayed in literature as poor street beggars, worthy of pity.

It is very hard to break away from centuries of misinformation, superstition, and discomfort. Even today, well-educated, intelligent people avoid contact with blind citizens due to fear, or lack of knowledge and exposure. This booklet will address some of the negative attitudes which still affect the lives of visually impaired people in our society, and will offer you specific suggestions on how to interact positively with blind citizens.



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WHO IS BLIND?

II-E3

Definitions

- Blind:** A person with total loss of visual image through light and shadow perception.
- Legally Blind:** A person with best correction who can see at 20 feet what someone with normal vision can see at 200 feet. Peripheral vision is at an angle less than 20 degrees. (A legal-medical definition used in legislation.)
- Partially Sighted:** A person with best correction who can see at 20 feet what someone with normal vision can see between 199 and 70 feet. Peripheral vision is at an angle less than 30 degrees. Images are fuzzy.

People*

A national health interview survey indicates that about 11.4 million people have some visual impairment, even with glasses. It is estimated that 1.4 million people are severely visually impaired (cannot read newsprint, even with glasses). According to the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness, about 500,000 people are registered as legally blind, and 80% of them have some usable vision. Therefore, approximately 100,000 people in the U.S. are totally blind. One million of all severely visually impaired people are over age 65. Although 364,000 visually impaired people are of working age, approximately 1/3 are presently in the labor force.

Causes

People can be born blind (congenital) or can become blind later in life through an accident or disease (adventitious). The leading cause of new cases of visual impairment in this country is diabetic retinopathy, a disease where blood vessels break on or in the retina. The direct cause is unknown. Other common causes include cataracts (cloudy lens), glaucoma (high pressure inside the eye), retinitis pigmentosa (damage to the retina), and macular degeneration (hardening of the eye area responsible for fine vision). In about 1/3 of the cases of blindness, the cause is unknown.

WHAT ARE ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS?

Prejudice	Discrimination
Ignorance	Dislike
Fear	Invisibility
Insensitivity	Insecurity
Bigotry	Discomfort
Stereotyping	Condescension
Misconception	Intolerance

The above words have all been used in association with or in definitions of attitudinal barriers. For this booklet, "attitudinal barriers" has been defined as "a way of thinking or feeling resulting in behavior that limits the potential of disabled people to be independent individuals."

*Statistics obtained from the American Foundation for the Blind, Inc.

MYTH:

Blindness means living in a world of darkness.

FACT:

Those blind people who have literally no vision do not see black. It is believed that congenitally blind people, or those with no memory of visual images (called visual memory), see literally nothing at all. This is hard to imagine, but try this: visualize what the word "the" means . . . not the letters, but the meaning. What do you see? Nothing. Some persons who have lost their sight after age six (the point at which one is no longer considered congenitally blind) see various colored lights and shapes before their eyes. Some, whose visual memory is extremely good, can picture in their mind activities that they do on a daily basis. Many people who are considered to be blind have some usable vision. Some people see light, others see shape, while still others have vision which is good enough to permit safe travel without aid of dog, cane, or sonic device.

**MYTH:**

Blind people can hear and feel things no one else can; they seem to have a "sixth sense."

FACT:

Blind people's senses are, in general, more highly developed than those of sighted persons, simply because blind people rely more on certain senses. But there is nothing mystical about it. For example, the soft humming of a water cooler may, for the most part, go consciously unnoticed by sighted persons. However, that water cooler with its soft hum may provide a blind person with a cue as to where (s)he is. Therefore, the blind person relies on the sense of hearing to indicate where the water cooler is, and proceeds from that point.

MYTH:

Some jobs and activities are specially suited to blind people.

FACT:

Blind people, as do all people, vary widely in ability and interest. There are no special jobs or activities in which all blind people excel over sighted people. Many employers have tried to stereotype blind people into certain types of jobs, like a darkroom technician or a dictaphone typist. But this is nothing but a disservice to many blind people who are capable of performing a wide variety of jobs (e.g., lawyer, teacher, executive).

**MYTH:**

All blind people are alike.

FACT:

Blind people are people who happen not to see. As a group, there is no single characteristic that applies to all visually impaired people. For example, some blind persons choose to use a white cane as a mobility aid, while others may choose to use a dog or a new sonic device. Blind people enter into as many varied professions, leisure activities, and lifestyles as do sighted people.

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT ATTITUDES?

1. Include blind citizens on task forces dealing with community planning (recreation, transportation, education) so that the community will meet the needs of all people.
2. Be sure that blind employees have a voice on planning committees that have employee representation.
3. Make sure meeting places are architecturally accessible to blind participants (e.g., raised elevator numbers). Provide alternatives to printed materials (cassette tapes, large print, braille) which sighted participants receive.
4. When you read or view a presentation that reflects a positive image of blind people (e.g., as productive citizens) write a complimentary comment to the publication or station carrying it.
5. If you have a child, friend or relative who is blind, talk to other people who are blind. In many cases, your concerns and fears can be overcome and corrected by sharing information with others.
6. When you read or view a presentation portraying blind people in a negative, stereotyped, or condescending way (sick, maladjusted, nonproductive), write a letter of protest to the involved newspaper, magazine, or television station.
7. Answer children's questions about blind people. Questions are normal. Remember that children get their information and attitudes from your behavior. Kids learn through imitation.
8. If a blind person feels (s)he can do something, but you can't understand how, ask the person. Talking things over makes things a lot clearer.
9. Experience is the best teacher. Get to know blind people and you will see your misconceptions disappear.

AIDS

A variety of assistive devices are available to blind and partially sighted persons to help them function as independent, fully-participating members of society. None of these aids restores sight; instead, they use partial vision and/or other senses to enable the visually impaired person to read, write, or participate in visually-oriented activities. Only a few are described here to give you an idea of what is available.

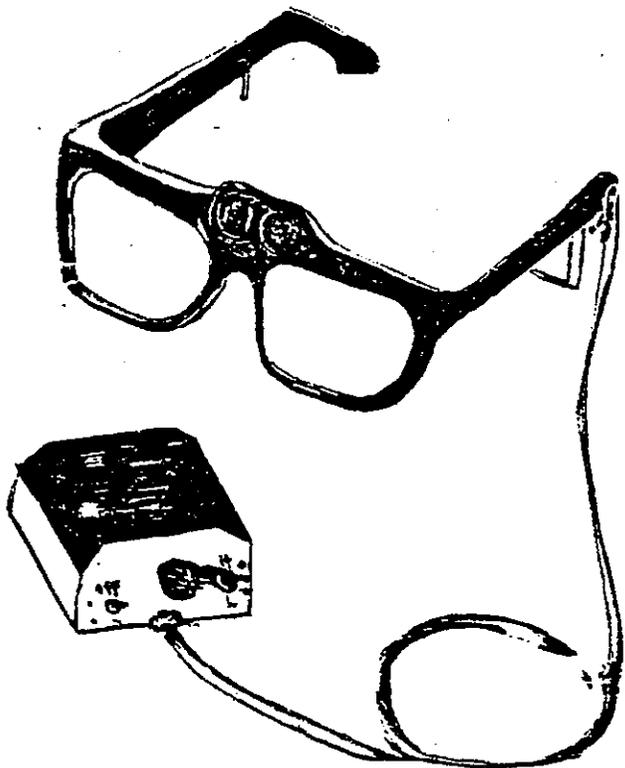
Braille is used by about 45,000 people who are legally blind. Braille is a system where the person can read words by running over a line of raised dots. A braille user can read at about half the speed of an average sighted person. A blind person can also take notes and write in braille, using a slate and stylus or a braillewriter. There are many braille writing aids such as braille paper and devices which produce braille labels on plastic tape.

Reading aids. The Optacon is a machine which changes a printed letter into a vibrating

tactile letter that a blind person can read with his/her index finger. Another device is the Kurzweil reading machine which can scan a printed page and read it aloud through a computerized speech synthesizer. Most blind people also have individuals read correspondence and other printed matter to them. For partially sighted people, large print materials and magnifying devices are available, as is a magnifying closed-circuit TV that enlarges words and images from 4 to 60 times their original size.

Listening aids. Because relatively few people read braille, most blind people have written materials read onto tape recorders. For example, "Talking Books" (a free service provided by the Library of Congress) enables millions of visually impaired people to read printed materials on tape. Also available are talking calculators that announce input and output, and computerized tape recorders, called speech compressors, that enable people to speed-read by ear.

Mobility aids. Blind individuals most commonly use sighted guides, canes, or dog guides as aids when traveling. The choice of aid is personal, based on the individual's needs, lifestyle, and abilities. A group of newly-developed aids use ultrasonic waves to guide the user by bouncing a sound signal off objects around the wearer of the device. For more information on mobility, the American Foundation for the Blind, Inc. has an excellent booklet called, "How Does A Blind Person Get Around?" which describes the above aids in detail.



WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU MEET A BLIND PERSON?

1. If a blind person seems to need help, go ahead and offer your assistance. But *do not help* unless the individual says you can. Always ask before you act. If you aren't sure exactly what to do, ask the person to explain how you should help.
2. To guide a blind person, let him or her take *your* arm. Don't grab the blind person's arm, as this is dangerous as well as insulting and frightening. The blind individual will walk about half a step behind you, following your body motions. If you encounter steps, curbs, or other obstacles, identify them. In places too narrow for you to walk two abreast, bring your arm back and let the guided person follow you.
3. When talking to a blind individual, use a normal tone and speed of voice. Shouting or speaking to an adult as a child is very insulting. Blindness does not affect hearing or intelligence. Speak directly to the blind person, not to a third party. When you are leaving a room, say so—anyone would feel foolish talking into thin air. Don't avoid using words like "blind," "look," or "see"; blind people use them, too.
4. When giving a blind person directions, be as clear and specific as possible. Make sure to point out obstacles in the direct path of travel. Since some blind people have no visual memory, be careful of using descriptions containing numbers of feet or yards (e.g., 50 feet ahead). If you're unsure of just how to direct a blind person, say something like, "I'd be happy to give you directions. How should I describe things?"
5. When guiding a blind person to a chair, simply guide the hand to the back of the chair and tell the person if the chair has arms. In a restaurant, it is also polite to read the person the menu and prices.
6. Resist the temptation to pet a working guide dog. If the dog is distracted from its work, its owner can be in danger. Always ask permission of the owner before interacting with the dog.
7. Use common sense and sensitivity. Most blind people's hearing is fine and comments like, "Isn't she brave!" or "Isn't it a shame he's blind," are usually heard and not appreciated. A blind person is just like you, only without sight. Give him or her the same respect as you would a sighted person.
8. When working or socializing with blind persons, don't exclude or excuse them from participating because you feel their blindness would be a problem. Let them make that decision. Don't lower your expectations (work load, social activities, etc.) of what the person can do. He or she may surprise you. Give a blind person the chance to succeed or fail, just like anyone else.

DID YOU KNOW?

YOUTH

Only 6% of the blind people in the United States are under 24 years old. Many people in this group were born blind or were blinded when they were very young. They have had to learn what the world "looks" like by hearing, feeling and smelling. People who become blind as adults have visual memories that help them understand the world.

There are many people who are partially sighted or have some vision problem. The Office of Education estimates that 10% of the school children have a vision impairment that can't be corrected with glasses.

LEGALLY BLIND

A person is considered legally blind when he has less than 20/200 vision after correction. Many "blind" people do see some shapes, color or light. Some see well enough to read large print.

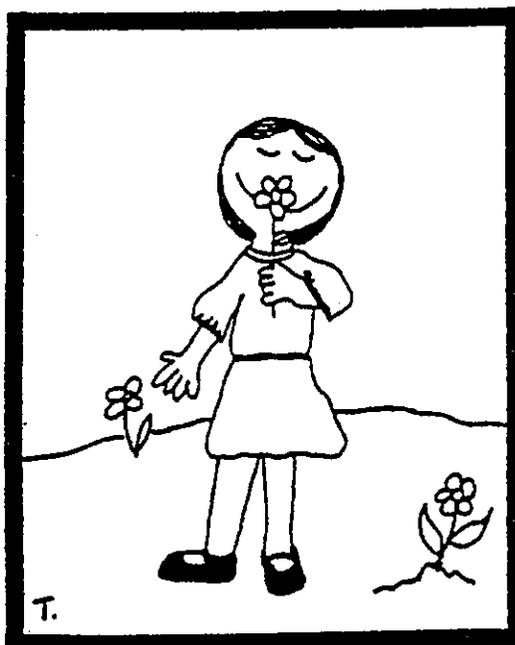
CAUSES

There are many causes of blindness. One out of every six blind persons has lost his sight through accident. This is an especially common cause in young people. One out of ten blind persons had glaucoma. Other major causes of blindness are viral diseases, cataracts and diabetes.

SENIOR CITIZENS

Blindness is more common in our older population. 2/3 of the people who are blind are over 55. 1/4 are over 75.

Most older people who lose their sight have not received the special education needed to adapt to their blindness. Most blind Senior Citizens do not know how to read Braille, have not had mobility training, and may have other health problems.



From Walk a Mile in Another Girl's Shoes, San Francisco Bay Girl Scouts

When You Guide...

1. HER CHOICE

Be sure she wants you to guide her. She may want to find her own way.

2. ESCORT SERVICE

Let her take your arm and walk a half step behind you. (Don't grab her and pull her along!)

3. TWO'S COMPANY

Only one person at a time should guide her. Others should be careful not to interfere.

4. THE BRIDGE IS OUT

Tell her of obstacles such as rocks on the path, low hanging branches, steps, etc. Tell how deep the steps are and whether they go up or down.

5. THE TORTOISE AND THE HARE

Walk fairly slowly unless she tells you to speed up.

6. KER-PLOP

When she wants to sit down, guide her hand to the chair; then, she can seat herself.

7. LOST IN SPACE

Do not leave a blind girl in a place where she will have problems finding her way.

8. MYSTERY GUEST

When you meet friends, tell her who is approaching.

9. 1 O'CLOCK, 2 O'CLOCK

3 O'CLOCK, LUNCH!

When eating, she may treat her plate as a clock. Tell her the meat is at 12:00, the salt off 10:00, etc.

...And More Tips

10. IT'S ME

When you approach a blind girl, identify yourself. When you walk away, tell her you are leaving. It is embarrassing to her, if she talks to you when you aren't there.

11. YOUR TURN, MARY

When it is her turn or you are talking to her, say her name.

12. OUR LANGUAGE

It is all right to use the words see, look, etc. when you talk to a blind person.

13. OBSTACLE COURSE

Be careful to keep paths clear so she will not trip. If you rearrange the furniture, tell her.

14. WOMAN'S BEST FRIEND

If a blind person has a guide dog, do not pet it or distract it unless he/she says you may.

From Walk a Mile in Another Girl's Shoes, San Francisco Bay Girl Scouts

AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR THE BLIND
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ABOUT BRAILLE

The Military Mind has made one of its noblest contributions in what it has done for the blind, for the origin of braille can be laid at the tent flaps of Barbier, an officer in Napoleon's army, who called his system "Night Writing." He was seeking a means of sending messages which could be read by touch at the front at night without exposing a light.

Barbier's method was not successful. It took the ingenuity of a blind man, Louis Braille, to make it practical. Originally Braille thought of braille solely for representing music. It was soon realized that the system could be used with equal facility to express mathematical equations and other scientific notations in all the various known languages.

HOW BRAILLE WORKS

The Braille cell is three dots high and two dots wide. This means, of course, that 63 different characters are possible.

Braille started by using ten combinations of the top four dots:

•	••	•••	••••	••	•••	••••	••	•••	••••
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J

The same ten characters, when preceded by a special sign, are used to express numbers -- 1 to 0. To make the next ten letters, the lower left hand dot is added:

••	•••	••••	•••••	•••	••••	•••••	•••	••••	•••••
K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T

If the lower right hand dot is now added, ten more characters are formed:

•••	••••	•••••	••••••	•••	••••	•••••	••••	•••••	••••••
U	V	X	Y	Z	and	for	of	the	with

W, it will be noted, has not yet appeared, since it was not used in the French Language. It does, however, show up in the next line which is again a repeat with the lower left hand dot omitted:

••	•••	••••	•••••	•••	••••	•••••	••••	•••••	••••••
ch	gh	sh	th	wh	ed	er	ou	ow	w

And so the construction continues until all possible combinations have been assigned meanings.

The right hand dots, standing alone in any combination, are used to change the meaning of the following character. These form the so-called two cell signs. Some of the two cell signs express complete words; others represent combinations of the letters. If the middle right hand dot precedes an "n", the meaning is name. If the top and bottom right hand dots precede the "n" inside a word the meaning is sion while if the bottom dot only precedes it, the meaning is ation.

This same bottom dot preceding any letter at the start of a word means that the letter is capitalized. This extra significance is not confusing because no word begins with ation. There are a number of instances where the same symbol has different meanings depending on where it appears. One symbol, for example, at the beginning of a word means dis. Inside a word it means dd. At the end of a word it means a period. If it is followed by the numeral sign it stands for \$.

In different applications, other values are assigned. In mathematical braille, for example, the symbol for the becomes the sign for the integral. The sign for ing means plus. The right hand dots are used to locate symbols above or below the line. In German, the ou sign means an umlaut u; the ow sign means an umlaut o, and so on.

Grade I braille in any language is fully spelled out; that is each character is represented by a separate sign. In English and many other languages Grade I is rarely used. Instead, a contracted or Grade II is taught even to beginners. This is not, strictly, shorthand, since the spelling is always indicated, though it approaches shorthand in the space it saves. Many of the symbols already given are from Grade II usage.

It is a fact today that relatively few blind people read braille--perhaps only one in five. This is partly because so many have become blind late in life--half are assumed over 65. Too often braille is regarded as a badge rather than a tool of blindness and too often it is not well taught. Moreover, the scope of available material in the past has not always made the effort to learn braille seem worthwhile.

People at age 65 can and do learn braille. Some have become really proficient. Blind people who have learned braille as children usually read faster than those blinded later in life. Some adults claim that their fingers are too calloused or too insensitive to read braille. Rarely is this really the case.

Initially, the beginner is likely to press too hard and to move his finger about, in an effort to see all the dots. This prevents attainment of any real speed. Some of the best readers read simultaneously with both hands. While the right hand is finishing line 1, the left is reading into line 2, storing the information in the unconscious for the moment then dropping it into place.

Experts in Communication Theory have begun to show an interest in this system since it has notable little redundancy. And recently air force researchers found themselves wondering if it might have any value in the jet plane cockpit. It is conceivable that soon it may have come full circle, and that the improvements blind people have made on Barbier's brain child may finally have some use for The Military.

Section: Exceptionalities
 Topic: Vision Impairments

Assignment # _____
 Due Date _____
 Name _____

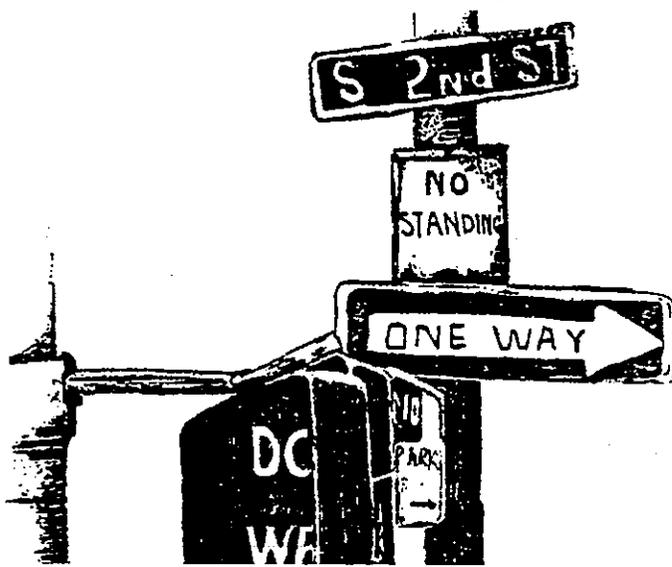
Following are four true scenes involving a person who has a visual impairment. Choose three of the four situations and answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What myths and attitudinal barriers are being portrayed?
2. How do you think a person with a visual impairment should respond? How do you think she or he feels?
3. Briefly recreate the scene using facts instead of myths.

1. Phyllis approaches a ticket counter at an airport in a large city. Seeing her white cane, the ticket agent is alerted to the fact that Phyllis has impaired vision. The ticket agent reaches over and wordlessly takes the ticket from Phyllis's hand. Suddenly, two more airline personnel appear and begin moving Phyllis in the direction of the security area. "Excuse me! What are you doing?" Phyllis asks. "It's alright, honey," says the first representative, we're taking care of you." Phyllis replies, "But I intend to meet friends here and travel on this flight with them." The second airline representative responds, "No, no, sweetie, it's alright. You're safe with us." Phyllis is now disoriented and humiliated. "What are you doing to me?" she asks. "Where are my friends?" "Now don't make a fuss, dear," replies the agent. "You'll be on the plane in just a minute. We must put you on the plane before the others so that we can take care of you.



2. Don is walking down a city street, using his cane as a mobility aid. He is suddenly stopped by a driver who is new to the area and needs directions. "Excuse me, sir," calls the driver, "Can you direct me to South 2nd Street?" "Yes," replies Don, "I live on South 2nd Street. Take a left at the next set of lights and then a right and you'll be there." "Oh!" replies the driver, seeing Don's white cane for the first time, "Thank you very much. I'm sorry I bothered you. I'll ask someone else."



3. Kate enters a children's apparel shop with her 6 month old baby. She asks the clerk to assist her in finding a particular type of outfit for her child. The clerk asks, "Is this your baby?" Kate responds, "Yes, he's mine." The clerk says, "I never saw a blind mother before. I can't understand how you manage to take care of him."



4. Todd and his dog guide enter the subway system. After going through the turnstile, they approach the platform waiting area. His dog guide brings him to the edge of the platform and stops. At the same time, a passerby reaches out and grabs Todd, shouting, "Stop! Stop! You're going to fall over the edge!"