

Courtesy Rules of Blindness

I am a blind person. Please say hello and get to know me! I want people to feel comfortable around me. Here are some simple tips.

Cane – My cane (or guide dog) is my independent travel aid. If you think I might need help, please just ask me.

Ordinary – Blind people are ordinary. It feels awkward if you think I am amazing when I accomplish ordinary tasks like walking or tying my shoes. I also like ordinary things and have ordinary hobbies. It is okay to be amazed if I do something really exceptional.

Understand – I may not recognize your voice if I don't know you well. Please say, "Hi, it is Sue."

Remember – I may have some sight, but use nonvisual techniques and tools like a cane because it works best for me. Sometimes people think I am "faking" because I see a little, but I am just picking techniques that are most efficient and safe in light of my vision.

Talk – Please talk to me rather than a companion, and there is no need to speak up so just use your normal speaking voice and talk with me like you would with other people.

Experience – I probably have years of experience using nonvisual techniques to live my life. Feel free to ask me how I do something, or how best you can assist me, if help is needed.

See – It's ok to still use words such as see and look. I will talk with you like everyone else, although I may not be able to make direct eye contact.

Yield – In all 50 states, the law requires drivers to yield the right of way when they see my extended white cane or guide dog. Only the blind may legally carry white canes. I listen to traffic patterns to know when to cross streets and to keep a straight line when moving around.

Thanks for reading about me. I look forward to getting to know you! For more information about the courtesy rules of blindness, gifts, bequests, programs for the blind, or other matters concerning blindness or the blind, contact the local chapter in your area or contact nfb@nfb.org or 410-659-9314.

“Courtesy Rules of Blindness.” National Federation of the Blind, 3 Feb. 2020, <https://www.nfb.org/programs-services/meet-blind-month/courtesy-rules-blindness>.

TIPS FOR INTERACTING WITH BLIND PEOPLE

Melody Roane, director of the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired, offers general tips for sighted people when interacting with blind individuals:

- Blind and vision-impaired individuals are a cross section of society, so while one person might have a particular skill, another might not. The key to successful interaction is communication.
- “Blind” is not a bad word, and individuals are often happy to explain their experiences. But they don’t dwell on it – they have many interests and enjoy discussing other topics. So while sighted people don’t have to avoid the topic of vision, they shouldn’t dwell on it, either.
- Blind people are teachers, customer service representatives, physicists, carpenters, business owners, financial advisers and more. Don’t just close your eyes and determine that, because you can’t imagine doing your job without vision, then blind people couldn’t do it. They have developed alternative techniques for doing many jobs and navigating life – in fact, problem-solving is one of their top attributes.
- “Amazing” is a cringe-worthy word. Taking an escalator, tying shoes, crossing the street or preparing a meal is not amazing, and low expectations are a barrier to successful integration into society and employment.
- Blind individuals are in control of their own lives and make their own decisions. Blindness does not necessitate a caretaker, and a sighted companion could be a friend or someone hired to assist with errands and accessing visual information. Direct questions to the blind person – for example, don’t ask someone else if he or she can sign a credit card receipt.
- Blind individuals on the street aren’t necessarily lost – they might be listening to traffic or using the sun to determine the right direction. It is OK to offer assistance, but it’s ok for a blind person to decline.

Kelleher, Ed. "Learning to navigate the world blind." Discover Richmond, Feb./Mar. 2018, pp. 14-25.