Volunteer guide

## Supporting older people who are blind or have low vision

## Background

About two-thirds of people who are blind or have low vision are over the age of 65.

As a volunteer, you're likely to meet someone navigating life with a vision condition.

This document is here to support you, offering helpful tips on how to communicate and guide older people living with vision loss, so you can create meaningful and positive connections during your volunteering experience.

## Overview

Volunteering is a wonderful opportunity to give back to the community. It’s an excellent way to:

* Develop and learn new skills.
* Meet like-minded people from a diverse range of backgrounds.
* Make a real difference in people’s lives.
* Gain valuable experience and insights into different perspectives.
* Build connections and relationships that enrich your own life.
* Contribute to meaningful causes and projects that matter to you.

# Understanding vision loss

It is often assumed that living with vision loss means living in total darkness, however the experience can be broad with varying degrees of remaining vision.

Low vision is used to describe someone who still has some functional vision but may need to be twice as close to an object as someone with unaffected vision to see it.

Blindness is when someone has very little or no sight and needs to rely almost completely on other senses like touch and hearing to understand and navigate their environments safely.

Dual sensory loss, also known as Deafblindness, is a combination of hearing and sight loss which impacts a person’s ability to communicate, access information and participate equally in society.

## Different kinds of eye conditions

Many different eye conditions can blindness and low vision. The most common causes are:

Age-related macular degeneration is a degenerative eye condition caused by changes to the macula (a tiny part of the retina at the back of the eye) that can result in gradual or sudden loss of vision.

Cataracts are the clouding of the clear lens in the eye and can appear in one or both eyes.

Diabetic retinopathy is a diabetes complication which can damage the tiny blood vessels inside the eye’s retina and cause bleeding and swelling, leading to partial or complete blindness.

Glaucoma is a group of eye diseases that cause progressive damage to the optic nerve. A gradual loss of sight, beginning with peripheral vision, will occur. If left untreated it can lead to blindness.

Retinitis pigmentosa is a complex hereditary eye condition that causes cells in the retina to degenerate slowly and progressively.

# How to guide someone with vision loss

It’s important to remember that we all have preferences for what we want help with and how that help is given. People who are blind or who have low vision are no different. Support from strangers, friends and family members can often make life a little easier.

However, it’s important to respect a person’s boundaries and independence, assisting them in ways that help, without you taking over. If you’ve never met someone who lives with vision loss before, it’s natural for you to be uncertain. But to know where to begin, all you need to do is ask.

## Read on for some tips on guiding someone who is blind or has low vision. You can also [view our guiding video](https://youtu.be/PBQiVGAgG_A) for more information.

## The sighted guide technique

Sometimes people who are blind or have low vision find it useful to be guided by another person. One way to do this safely and efficiently is to use sighted guide techniques. Not all people with vision loss use these methods, so it is important to ask what, if any, specific assistance they would like. Here are some techniques you may find useful:

### Offer your arm

Touch the back of your hand to the back of theirs. They can then find your elbow and hold your arm lightly just above the elbow. You can relax your arm down by your side.

### Stay half a step ahead

When you start walking, make sure the person is half a step behind you and slightly to the side. Walk at a pace that is comfortable for both of you. Look ahead for obstacles at foot level, head height and to the side.

### Narrow spaces

Move your guiding arm towards the centre of your back to indicate that they need to walk behind you. The person should step in behind you while still holding your arm. When you have passed through the narrow space bring your arm back to its usual position by your side.

### Steps and staircases

Stop at the first step and tell the person you are guiding whether the steps go up or down. If necessary, change sides so the person you are guiding can use the handrail. Start walking when they are ready and stay one step ahead. Stop when you both reach the end of the stairs and tell the person if they are at the top or bottom.

### Seating

Explain which way the chair is facing and where it is in relation to the rest of the room. Then walk up and place the hand of your guiding arm on the chair and explain which part of the chair you are touching. The person you are guiding can then move their hand down your arm to locate the chair and seat themselves.

# Communication tips

It can be hard to know how to speak and engage with someone living with vision loss if you haven’t done so before. The following are some useful tips for you to remember and keep on hand.

* Identify yourself. Don't assume someone will recognise you by your voice.
* Never channel conversation through a third person.
* Say their name so they know you are speaking to them.
* Speak naturally and clearly. Loss of eyesight does not mean loss of hearing.
* Don't avoid words like "see" or "look" or talking about everyday activities such as watching TV or videos. Just use everyday language.
* In dangerous situations say ‘STOP’, rather than terms like ‘look out’.
* Keep using body language. This will affect the tone of your voice and give a lot of extra information to the person with vision loss.
* Avoid situations where there is competing noise.
* In a group situation, do a roll call and introduce the other people present.
* Let them know if you are leaving the room or moving away.

## Safety

Dealing with the number of changes someone who is blind or has low vision faces when it comes to their safety can be overwhelming. You can help them to feel more comfortable by:

* Identifying trip hazards. This is especially important for older people who are blind or have low vision, who are more likely to fall.
* A railing along common hallways can help people walk unassisted and feel orientated.
* Chairs should be pushed in and any rubbish on the floor should be picked up immediately.
* Where possible, it’s good to inform people of any changes to their environment, such as unusually placed items in the walkway or repairmen in the building.
* Close doors or open them fully. Never leave them ajar.
* Be aware of low-hanging branches when outside.

## Orientating

### Here are some detailed and practical tips for effectively orienting someone with vision loss, ensuring they feel more comfortable and confident in navigating their surroundings:

### Start from a central point, such as their bed, to help them get oriented to the room.

* When introducing them to a new space, walk with them rather than just giving verbal directions. This approach helps them learn distances and pick up on sensory cues, making it easier for them to navigate independently in the future.

## Mealtimes

If you’re volunteering at a day centre and supporting older people during mealtimes, here are some simple tips to keep in mind:

* Suggest a well-lit table, or a table near the window.
* Let them know if you’re moving items on the table.
* Ask if they need the help, rather than just offering to do something for them, like cutting their food.
* You can help orientate them to what is on the plate by saying, “The steak is at 3 o’clock, the salad is at 6 o’clock and the potatoes are at 9 o’clock.”
* Keep the water jug closer to you to avoid accidental liquid spills.
* Provide any hot drinks in non-spill containers and tell the person where they are placed.
* Colour contrast is important for people living with vision loss. When items are bigger, bolder or brighter they are easier to locate. For example, placing a dark tray or cloth under a light plate helps define the plate's edges, making it easier to find.

## Personal items

To make navigating daily life easier for someone with vision loss, try these practical tips for managing their personal items and home environment:

* Don’t move furniture or personal items around. If you need to move someone’s belongings, let them know.
* Keep regularly used items like TV remotes and house keys in the same place.
* Encourage storage solutions for necessary areas around the home.
* Keep shower caddies organised and full.
* Ensure phone and other device chargers remain plugged into the same outlet.

# Summary

As a volunteer, your consideration and care can make a meaningful difference in the lives of people who are blind or have low vision. By understanding their needs and making thoughtful adjustments, you help create a more supportive, inclusive and accessible environment.

For more information, contact us today at [info@visionaustralia.org](mailto:info@visionaustralia.org) or by visiting us online at [www.visionaustralia.org](http://www.visionaustralia.org)