

Whenever we come across a person who is visually impaired, we are unsure when and how to step in and help. Offering help without asking could appear as insensitive at times, and could possibly make the recipient feel a little hurt. But it is definitely not because they do not appreciate your help!

Before getting to know how you can help the visually impaired, it is good to know some basic etiquettes and have a certain level of disability awareness.

general etiquettes

Never jump in to offer your help. When in doubt, you can always ask politely. ☐ Only when your offer is accepted, ask what they would like you to do. If they reject help, please do not insist on helping! That can be quite impolite even with good intentions in mind. Only do what is asked of you and no more; they are more independent than what you think of them. Even the perfectly able-bodied can get frustrated if people keep insisting on helping you when you are perfectly comfortable with doing it by yourself right?

Don't disturb a working guide dog. Guide dogs are specially trained animals that are invaluable to people that are visually impaired. The guide dogs enhance their lives and allow them to be more independent. When a guide dog is on duty, please don't pet or distract the dog without permission, as it could bring potential danger to the owner. If you intend to offer food or toys (we know they are very lovable), we suggest not. Doing that could alter their behaviour and cause inconvenience to their owners.



Photo Credit: O Mundo Animal/Sienanews

be aware of your actions

You don't have to avoid words like "see" or "look". Having a vision disability does not necessarily mean that a person lives in very much different from you. It is perfectly fine to talk about daily activities such as watching the TV or Youtube videos. Consciously avoiding such topics can in fact be more uncomfortable for them.

Always greet the person. If you're walking into a place where the visually impaired is waiting, let them know of your presence right away! Remaining silent until you're beside the person makes them feel uncomfortable (I know i will be), like as if you're up to something no good. When greeting the person, let them know your name so that they can identify who you are.

Let the person know when you leave the room. Usually, you wouldn't do that in a

normal situation. However, in this circumstance, you probably should. The person might not always be able to hear you walk out and it would come off as being rude if the person wants to talk to you and realise that he is left talking to air.

giving directions to a certain venue

Keep in mind that you're communicating with a special group of people. Using words like "it is over there" or "just round the corner" is not of much help, and may be taken as offensive. Instead, tell accurate direction, such as "it is on your left" and specify how far away it is. Giving additional pointers such as how many streets to cross, using landmarks that they will be passing by as part of the direction is will be helpful. Remember that we have other sense as well other than our sight. The smell of coffee, sound of an escalator, scent of flowers, can all be used as a part of navigation. The grass and the road feels different too right? Think creatively of how you can help the visually impaired to get to their next destination safely.

leading the visually impaired

When asked for assistance to guide their way from one place to another, guide their hand to the back of your arm, just above your elbow. Most of them prefer to hold your arm at this position as you walk. Walk a half step ahead the person you're guiding, and don't go too fast — you probably have to walk a tad slower than your normal pace. In the case where the person uses a probing, walk on the other side.



Photo Credits: Kevin Martin

It would be really helpful if you can try to describe the things you'd encounter along the way in detail. This allows the person to better know their environment and feel more at ease. As a human guide, you're like the "eyes" of the visually impaired. Identify potential obstacles ahead and provide verbal cues to the person.

Stairs and escalators. When approaching such obstacles, you'll have to be more specific with your verbal cues. If there are some stairs ahead, stop at the edge of the first step and let the person know the direction of the steps (up or down?). Inform the person of the number of steps they have to take and warn them about uneven or steep steps. Be one step ahead and remember to reach a complete stop at the end of the stairs and let the person know that their taking the last step. Most buildings in Singapore would also have lifts, so try to use them as much as possible. In cases where you have to take the escalator, also let the person know when to step on and when to get off.

helping the visually impaired to a chair

Start by placing the person's hand on the back of the chair. This makes them aware of where the chair is and helps them to sit better. Describe in detail the height of the chair and the way in which it's facing. Never try to steer the person backwards into the chair. It may cause the person to lose their balance and that's the last thing you want to do. You're suppose be of help!



Photo Credits: Braille Works

If it is a bench in the garden, or seats that are not movable, bring the person in contact with the front of the seat where their knees get in touch. Let them know they type of chair in contact so that they can make their own judgement on how to sit.

moving through a doorway

Let the person know which side the door opens, toward or away from you, when approaching the door. Guide the person to the side with the hinge and inform them whether it is a sliding door, or a swinging one. As a guide, you should open the door and step through first. Place the person's hand on the doorknob, allowing him or her to close the door afterwards.

so now, will you help someone visually impaired?

After reading all these, you'll probably feel better equipped with the knowledge to help the visually impaired. It is totally normal if we feel shy to approach them and ask if they need help, but the help that we offer can make a huge difference to their day. Step out of your comfort zone and make a difference! ☐