

## Being a Sighted Guide

Often, people with vision loss need some assistance with walking safely outside their familiar environment. Perhaps a friend or family member may try to help by holding hands or by resting hands on one or the other's shoulder, but these methods are not safe and can lead to accidents. The following skills are designed to help you and the person you are guiding maximize safety and efficiency when walking together.

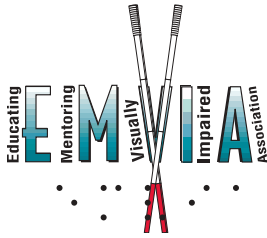
You, the sighted guide, are **responsible for the safety of the blind person** at all times, regardless of the errors on the blind person's part. You must be especially careful to monitor obstacles at various levels from head to toe, including furniture, fixtures, people, overhanging obstacles, and the walking surface. You must meet the needs of the blind person.

If you will function as a primary guide for a blind person, it's very important that you get at least some training by a licensed Orientation and Mobility (O&M) specialist. Like a therapist or a counselor, an O&M specialist knows and considers many important facts that you just might never have considered. Use the advice.

### General Walking Position

You can give verbal cues such as "take my arm", and/or nonverbal cues such as touching the back of the blind person's hand with the back of your hand. They should stand next to and slightly behind you, facing in the same direction. Therefore they are always at least a half step behind you.

Because of height differences, your arm is grasped at a location such that her upper arm and forearm are at a right angle. A preschooler may grip an adult's wrist, whereas a tall person may need to grip a short guide's arm just under the armpit. The right angle allows for movement up or down for steps or curbs, etc. Her upper arm remains close to her body. The wrist is neither flexed nor hyper-extended, and the forearm aims straight ahead.



They should hold your arm just above the elbow with their thumb on the outside of the guide's arm with a grip firm enough so that you don't lose contact, but not so firm that it is uncomfortable. You should walk a half step in front and to the side. Your right foot should be in line with her left, or vice versa depending on what you two decide is most comfortable. The blind person should be responsible for maintaining orientations as well as the proper grip and alignment with the guide, but if they are incapable of doing so, the sighted guide is responsible for monitoring this. As you begin to walk, you should always remain in front, explaining what's ahead.

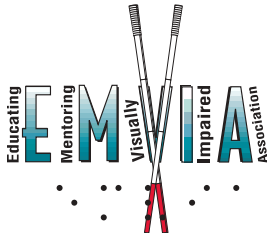
Act as the person's eyes. Remember, they are counting on you to provide accurate information about the environment. Announce obstacles, such as a curb, stairs, or other danger points, before getting to them. When you guide, never leave the person in the middle of an open area. If you have to be separated briefly, be sure the person is in contact with a wall, railing, or some other stable object until you return, and tell the person you are leaving.

### **Navigating Narrow Spaces**

If the two of you are approaching a narrow space, you signal the change by putting your hand behind your back and the blind person then moves to a position directly behind you. In a passageway, the trick is to avoid following so closely that they step on your heels.

### **Going through Doorways**

When going through a door, you will need to tell them which way it swings and does it open out or in? The whole idea with doors is to fully understand who is going to open the door and in what direction, and who is going to hold it open when walking through it. Unless you two have an understanding otherwise, in general if the door opens on the right, you should be on their left side, and if the door opens on the left, you should be on their right. This may require a change of sides. If the door is closed, usually the guide opens it and you shut it behind you. Again, talk it out.



## **Up and Down Curbs and Stairs**

In an unfamiliar area, the guide should indicate all level changes. With both ascending and descending curbs and stairs, you approach square on. Even once you get used to a rhythm enough to time stepping up or down curbs and such, when approaching any such level change the guide should announce "Curb up," or "Stairs going down." Then, the guide should step forward and allow them to find the stair or curb with their toes. If there is a handrail, the guide always positions the blind person to easily grab the rail with their free hand should they choose. When traveling down stairs, you stay one step ahead. Tell them how many steps are involved, and when approaching the end of the stairs, you should say it's the last step.

## **Help with Seating**

When you get to a seating situation, place their hand on the back of the chair and/or guide the person to the chair so that their knees or shins gently contact the edge of the seat. Tell the person that they are facing the front, back or side of the chair. For table/chair combinations or with stools or other unusual seating, explain the situation first, and then place the person's hand on it. The point is to orient the person with enough information to make finding and using their seat easy.

In an auditorium or theater, you first explain the situation, then enter the aisle by side-stepping side-by-side with the blind person, maintaining contact with the blind person by touching the backs of each other's hands until you have located your respective seats. In any seating situation you of course always let the blind person to seat themselves.