



## A Guide to Interacting with Deafblind People

### Introduction

Deafblind people use a variety of high- and low-tech tools as they engage on a daily basis with the world. In addition, communication can be in diverse modes and methods and with individualized devices and styles. Because each deafblind person is unique, there is no one, right way to interact with all deafblind people. Nonetheless, there are certain rules of etiquette that apply to all human interactions. Use common sense and courtesy and treat people as you would like to be treated. By thoughtfully using this philosophy and the guidelines below, your interactions with deafblind people will be rewarding, insightful and successful.

### General Principles

- Things will take extra time, perhaps 3x as long. Be patient and flexible.
- Do not assume to know what the deafblind person prefers, their wants or needs, or what they can or cannot do. Always ask and respect their choices.
- Do not offer your comments or opinions unless asked.
- Do not feel sorry for the deafblind person. Just enjoy the engagement.
- Plan activities in advance so that the deafblind person knows what to expect and has time to plan accordingly.
- Wear a solid-colored top in contrast to your skin tone to eliminate eye strain.
- Touch and smell are important information-gathering senses. Do not ignore the use of these senses.
  - Do allow a deafblind person the opportunity to tactually explore an object, if permitted and they want to.
  - Do not use strong smelling perfumes or colognes; they may be distracting.
- A service dog is a working dog. Ask before you touch or pet. Do not interfere with how the owner works the dog.
- In the event of an emergency, draw the universal sign for "emergency" – a large X – on the deafblind person's back; they will take your elbow – without conversation – and expect to be guided to safety. Once safe, describe the emergency and the next steps.

## Respect & Dignity

- Respect the deafblind person's privacy and dignity. Do not ask personal questions and do not share personal information with others, unless this information is necessary for the person's safety or well-being.
- Do not assume. Ask for, respect and follow through on their preferences for communication, tactile cues, the amount of visual information they want and mobility.
- Respect a deafblind person's personal space. Never grab by the hand, wrist or arm. Do not move their hand. Never pull from under the armpit. Never push, pull or shove a deafblind person in any way.
- Use the hand-under-hand method to guide a deafblind person's hand to objects: Slip your hand under theirs, allow their hand to rest lightly on the back of yours, and then guide gently to the object. Once contact is made, lightly slip your hand out from underneath.
- Do not use your sight to snoop or spy.
- Do not touch or move a deafblind person's personal items such as their purse, wallet, phone, keys, glasses or cane. Likewise, do not move a deafblind person's things – not even a coat or a cane; leave them where they are.
- It's okay to offer help. The deafblind person may or may not accept. If they accept, do not judge or comment.
- Ask the deafblind person if they'd like to join you in something you're doing, such as setting up or cleaning up an event, cooking, carrying something or joining a conversation with others.
- Consider everything you say to be a promise that will happen. If you say, "I'll see you tomorrow," or "Let's go out to eat this weekend," and it doesn't happen, this lack of follow through can be very disappointing for the deafblind person.

## The Condition of Being Deafblind

- Few people who are deafblind are fully deaf and fully blind. Most have some residual sight and hearing.
- While partial vision or hearing can be useful, it can also be unreliable. If you can, and if the deafblind person wants, describe what's going on.
- Do not point to or at objects or say "over there." Do use directional terms (ex: to our right) and measurements (about 5 steps ahead).
- Glare can interfere with the deafblind person's comfort in using their limited vision. After describing the location of the lights and windows, ask the deafblind person where they'd like to sit.

- Touch is an important sense for information-gathering, but do not assume that a deafblind person wants to feel your face or how tall you are.
- Respect the skills, tools, techniques and equipment and how they are used by the deafblind person.

### **Approaching a Deafblind Person**

- Do not interrupt. If the person is eating or talking with someone else, wait.
- Touch a deafblind person's hand gently to get their attention, and wait for them to acknowledge you. If the person is partially sighted, move to where they can see you and then touch their hand gently. Do not tap someone on the back or shoulder because that can be startling, and they may not be able to see you by turning and looking.
- Always identify yourself. If you know each other, use your sign name. If meeting for the first time, spell your full name and then your name sign. NEVER ask the deafblind person to guess who you are, or insist that they remember you.
- Let the deafblind person know who else is with you.

### **Communicating with a Deafblind Person**

- Ask for, respect and follow through on the deafblind person's preferences for communication, including the type of language (spoken, signed or both), positioning, space, speed, and/or more or less fingerspelling. Ask for instruction and feedback, as necessary.
- A tactile signer will likely put his or her hands on top of yours, in the position they prefer.
- Speak directly to the deafblind person, not to the interpreter, SSP or family member or friend.
- If you don't understand something the person has said, ask for clarification.
- NEVER ask another person to speak for the deafblind person.
- The deafblind person may not see your body language – such as a head nod, or a smile. Some deafblind people prefer tactile cues for this type of information. Ask first, never assume.
- To respect privacy, let the deafblind person know if someone is observing the conversation (whether invited or not). Do not eavesdrop on personal conversations.
- If there is an interruption, fingerspell or sign "hold" and tell the deafblind person who/what is interrupting. When the interruption is finished, let the

deafblind person know the outcome. If the interruption is someone wanting to join the conversation, be sure that the deafblind person is fully involved.

### **Being a Human Guide for a Deafblind Person**

- For safety and communication, your hands and arms must be free (no bulky purses or backpacks).
- Wear comfortable shoes that allow safe walking.
- Allow the deafblind person to take your elbow (from behind your arm) or place a hand on your shoulder and walk by your side, about a half step behind you. They will feel and follow your movements.
- You will always enter a space first, such as going through doorways or boarding public transportation.
- Never abandon a deafblind person in an unfamiliar place.

### **Leaving**

- Let the deafblind person know that you're leaving.
- Ask if they want to talk to someone or go to a certain place.
- Never leave a deafblind person alone without letting him or her know, or in an unfamiliar place.
- Always say "goodbye."