Making meetings and seminars accessible

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http://www.cnib.ca/en/services/resources/Accessible_Meeting/Pages/default.aspx

The basics

- **Introductions:** When being introduced to people who have sight loss, say hello and wait for them to offer their hand to be shaken. When introducing yourself, simply say something like “Hi, my name is Kevin Jones. Great to meet you. Let’s shake hands.”

- **Conversing:** Treat people with sight loss as people first. Relax and be yourself and speak the way you usually do. There’s no need to shout or alter your voice. Also, feel free to use the words “see,” “look” or “read” – people with sight loss use them too!

- **Introducing Others:** Participants with sight loss may not know who else is in the room, or how many people there are. Introduce each person by name and indicate where he or she is in the room relative to the person with sight loss. For example, “To your left is Jack Smith; two metres in front of you is Susan Taylor.”

- **Room Orientation:** Describe the layout of the room, whether it is square or narrow, how many tables and chairs there are, how they are arranged, whether there are objects such as water glasses or candies on the table, and where the refreshments and washrooms are located. Use specific directions such as “straight ahead,” “forward,” “left,” and “right” (instead of something vague such as “over there”). For example, you might say, “There is a table in the middle of the room, about six feet in front of you.” Or “There is a coffee table on the left side of the door as you enter.”

- **Leaving:** Tell the person with sight loss when you’re leaving their presence, even if it’s just for a moment – “I’m just going to the ladies’ room – back in a moment,” or “Goodbye, Andrea. I’m heading off
now!” will usually do the trick. Make sure that they’re in contact with a tangible object such as a wall, table or chair. Not only is this good manners, but it means they’re not left stranded in an open space, talking to someone who’s already left the room.

- **A Note About Guide Dogs**: Do not pet a guide dog in harness, as tempting as this may be! Guide dogs are working animals and distracting them can be hazardous for the people they are guiding.

**Before a seminar:**

If possible, find out before the meeting which format participants with sight loss prefer to read (large print, braille, electronic text, audio CD, etc.) and have all materials for the meeting available in that format. Since it takes longer to review material in alternative formats, it is helpful to give material to the participants beforehand if possible. Having the material in advance will allow participants to be informed, prepared and better able to participate fully in the meeting.

**During the seminar:**

- **Introductions**: Have everyone at the table introduce themselves, in the order they are seated, so that people with sight loss know who is at the table and where.
- **Entering or Leaving**: Make sure that everyone announces themselves when entering or leaving the room.
- **Speaking During the Meeting**: Ensure that each person states his or her name each time before speaking, throughout the meeting. “This is Steve speaking,” is sufficient.
- **Group Discussion**: When facilitating a group, state the name of the person to whom you are speaking and let it be known when the conversation is at an end. For example, “Sarah, could you please outline your ideas…Thanks, Sarah. That answers my question.”
- **Non-Verbal Communication**: Remember that participants with sight loss will probably not notice non-verbal communication such as rolling your eyes or expressive facial expressions. Avoid relying on them to make a point.
- **Noise**: Keep noise to a minimum. Rustling papers, tapping fingers on the table, etc., are distracting and interfere with communication.
- **Side Conversations**: Do not engage in side conversations if there is a main speaker. Not only is it rude, but since a person with sight loss relies on hearing to obtain information, extraneous noise is distracting.
and makes it difficult to concentrate on the information being presented.

- **Visual Aids:** Verbally describe any charts or visual materials you are using so that people with sight loss are able to use the information contained in them. “Pretend you're describing the objects in your view over the phone,” says Fran Cutler, Past Chair, National Board of Directors, CNIB. If possible, provide a copy of the slides, charts, or overheads in alternative format to the participant with sight loss before the meeting to allow him or her to follow along with the presentation.

  Participants with sight loss may not be able to see information presented on a flipchart, so ensure that the presenter regularly summarizes key points.

- **Presentations:** PowerPoint presentations in particular can be a challenge for participants with sight loss. Describing the content is a must, says Penny Hartin, but paying attention to things like contrast, font type (serif vs. sans serif) and brightness and eliminating distractions such as animation can make your presentation much more accessible.

- **Handouts:** When handing more than one item to a person with sight loss, state which item is on top, in the middle and on the bottom.

- **Assistive Devices:** If a person uses a communication aid or assistive device, do not play with it or ask to try it. These aids are an extension of the individual’s personal space and should be respected as such.

- **Forms:** Offer assistance in filling out forms. However, if the presenter knows ahead of time that this will be required, notify the participant with sight loss in advance so he or she can be prepared, either by bringing an assistant, a CCTV (closed circuit television), or a laptop computer.

- **Written Material:** Be prepared to read aloud any written information not made available in alternative formats, such as PowerPoint presentations. Read in a normal speaking voice, at a normal pace, without skipping any information.

**Afterwards**

- **Belongings:** At the end of the meeting, let people with sight loss know if they have left anything behind.
• **Leaving:** Offer to assist the person with sight loss in finding their way to the elevators, exits etc. if needed and don’t forget to say “goodbye” when you leave their presence.

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