

About Blindness — Myths and Realities



*Empowering visually impaired
people to live fulfilling lives*

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Braille Institute® also offers Community Outreach programs at more than 450 locations throughout Southern California. Call the nearest regional center for locations.

When sighted people encounter a person who is blind or visually impaired, they may still imagine a blind person operating a newsstand or asking for a handout with a tin cup, as was common during the 1930s and '40s. Today, outdated stereotypes and misconceptions can be dismissed as the following myths and their opposing realities are understood:

Myth: All blind people are totally blind and can see only darkness.

Reality: Most people who are legally blind have some residual vision. Legal blindness means that a person with normal vision can see the big "E" on a standard eye chart at 200 feet, whereas a person who is legally blind can only see it at 20 feet. A person with normal sight has a 180-degree field of vision, whereas if a person's eyesight can encompass only a field of 20 degrees or less, this is considered legal blindness. More than 75 percent of legally blind people can use their residual vision to perform many of life's daily tasks.

Myth: Sign language and braille are the same thing.

Reality: Sign language is a visual means of communication used by people who are deaf or hearing impaired. It utilizes a system of arm and hand gestures that stand for letters, words and phrases. Braille is a coded system of tactile communication for people without sight. It is composed of more than 250 character and word signs created by arrangements of from one to six raised dots within a braille cell. Braille enables blind people to read by touch or write by creating the code on special paper with slate and stylus or a braillewriter.

Still another system, used to communicate with people who are both deaf and blind, is palm printing. This system uses the actual letters of the alphabet by tracing them on the palm of the recipient's hand to spell out words and sentences.

Myth: All blind people read braille.

Reality: Only about 10 percent of people who are blind read braille. As people age, many of them are forced to stop reading braille because of losing the sensation in their fingertips, a common effect of diabetes and other diseases. About 75 percent of people who are legally blind can read printed material, using a combination of their own limited vision and visual aids that provide magnification and special lighting. Many can read print if it is enlarged.

About Blindness — Myths and Realities (continued)

Myth: Blind people are required by law to carry white canes.

Reality: People who are blind or visually impaired are not required by law to carry white canes. It is illegal, however, for a person who is not legally blind to carry a white cane. A white cane is also a safety device—it serves as a warning to drivers and informs police, firefighters and other officials that the user is legally blind. Many choose to do so because with proper training a person can use a cane to move with confidence and safety through environments both familiar and unfamiliar.

Myth: Expensive modifications in the workplace are required to accommodate a blind employee.

Reality: Many adaptations can be made at little or no cost. Often a minor accommodation, such as improved lighting or additional software, is all that is needed. For example, glare on her computer screen caused fatigue for a visually impaired employee. The solution was to purchase an anti-glare screen, which cost the employer only \$39.

Myth: People who are deprived of sight are compensated by increased acuteness in their other senses.

Reality: Being blind does not usually make other senses more acute. With proper training, however, a blind person can learn to use his or her other senses more efficiently by using different means to achieve the same end goals.

Myth: People who are legally blind can further damage their remaining sight through normal use.

Reality: People should be encouraged to use their remaining sight. Eyes cannot be weakened or damaged by normal use.

Myth: People who have lost their sight need extra supervision.

Reality: Sighted people should not be overprotective of people who are blind or visually impaired, although occasionally they still may need help. Let them tell you when they need your help. This increases their degree of self-confidence and reinforces their capabilities, not their disability.

For more information about blindness and visual impairment — or to find out more about training, classes, services and products for visually impaired people — call the Braille Institute® center nearest you, or visit our website.

Braille Institute is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to eliminate barriers to a fulfilling life caused by blindness and severe sight loss.



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