



Older Individuals who are Blind
Technical Assistance Center

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ON BLINDNESS & LOW VISION



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Lesson 4: Tools in Your Toolbox, Techniques to Perform Everyday Tasks

Introduction

Is it difficult to insert the key into your front door? Do you have difficulty locating buttons on the TV remote? Do you wonder if your dishes are spotless after washing them? Similar questions were asked at the beginning of Lesson 3, where you learned that you could use your senses to help accomplish everyday tasks. Lesson 4 will introduce techniques to add to your toolbox. Some of the methods covered in this lesson are visualization, spatial orientation, systematic search patterns, landmarks, and, of the utmost importance, organization.

Lesson Goals

- Identify and describe basic techniques for everyday tasks
- Collect examples of ways to use these basic techniques in everyday life

Visualization

Visualization is not part of the sense of vision. However, it is fundamental to learning to live with vision loss. Individuals with adult-onset vision loss have many visual memories that they can utilize. For example, a person who lived in the same home before their vision loss can use their visual memory to help them remember the home's layout and details. This can be extremely helpful when navigating around the house or doing activities within the home. Practice visualizing by starting with one room or section of the room and recall everything you can about that space. Think about the kitchen. How is it laid out? Is it a square or long and narrow? Where is the stove in relation to the sink? Is there a window? What color are the counters, floors, cabinets, and appliances? What is on the countertops? Go into as much detail as possible and try to visualize each aspect. This can be done for every common area to practice using visualization as a tool.

Another technique is to visualize a task. Choose a task performed frequently before losing vision, such as riding a bike, cooking, or doing the dishes. Now, imagine doing that task and, at the same time, imagine how it

felt when doing the task. Be as detailed and thorough as possible. This technique will help in performing familiar tasks in a new way. Visualization can also be utilized in unfamiliar spaces or with unfamiliar tasks. The only difference is that the information will not be coming from memory; it will need to be provided by exploration or having another person describe the layout and details. The technique for this will be discussed in a later lesson.

Spatial Orientation & Organization

Spatial orientation is the ability of a person who is blind to develop fluid movements when performing a task within a given space without the use of vision. When someone has excellent spatial orientation, movements are so fluid and natural, and it may look as if he can see perfectly well while performing the task. This ability should not be surprising. People can do this frequently without effort. Many people who wear glasses can reach for their glasses on the bedside table without looking or turning on a light. In familiar settings or situations, people can know where they are related to the objects around them without using their vision

Associated with spatial orientation is the concept of spatial organization. This technique refers to organizing a workspace to move within the given space efficiently. For example, when making cookies, use a tray to assemble the ingredients and equipment needed. The tray provides a defined boundary, which creates spatial organization for doing the tasks. Place the mixing bowl, measuring spoons, and measuring cups on the tray. Using spatial orientation, place the needed ingredients around the outside of the tray in the order they appear in the recipe. This method allows you to move easily from one item to the next, avoiding knocking anything over. As each ingredient is used, put it away. This same technique can be used for many tasks, such as arranging items for a sewing project, paying bills, or changing a light bulb.

Another technique associated with spatial orientation is "body-size space." Most tasks can be comfortably performed within a body-size space or a series of body-size spaces. A body-size space is one in which tasks can be performed within a comfortable reach. For example, the tray just mentioned is a body-size space. A kitchen stove is slightly wider than the average human body, and all stove parts can be operated with a comfortable reach.

Kitchens are typically arranged in a series of body-size spaces. The stove, some refrigerators, the dishwasher, and microwave are oriented to the area in which a person can reach comfortably. Drawers, cabinet doors, and sinks and other appliances, mirrors, windows, doors, and most furniture are also approximately the same sizes.

Combine body-size space, spatial orientation, spatial organization, and muscle memory, and you have the critical tools needed to do most tasks. For example, sweeping the kitchen floor is more manageable if you divide it into small body-size grid sections and then sweep each small section using overlapping strokes. Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors can be cleaned using these same methods. These same techniques can also be applied to outdoor tasks. For example, the yard is easier to mow if you divide it into small sections with easily visible section markers.

Systematic Search Patterns

For some people with visual impairment, locating lost or dropped items can be a challenge. People are used to scanning with their vision and finding the item before moving to get it. That isn't effective if the person has low vision. Therefore, systematic searching patterns are taught to help make this task easier. When locating a cup on the dinner table, a pill bottle on the bathroom counter, or a sock in the dryer, searching with hands in a systematic pattern is critical.

The best technique to use when searching on a flat surface is the grid pattern, which allows us to systematically search on a table or counter, moving from front to back and left to right, ensuring full coverage of the area. This technique is the visually impaired person's version of visually scanning the environment. It is best to make a loose fist and keep your hand touching the surface of the area you are searching, to prevent issues such as knocking something over while searching.

This technique needs some slight modification when searching on surfaces that are not flat or checking appliances such as a washer, dryer, microwave, or oven. Concentric circles can be used instead of the grid pattern where appropriate. This is done by starting in the center of a space and then making overlapping circles with the hand until the entire surface,

or sectioned area is covered. It is also possible to use both hands to cover the surface area more quickly as long as this does not impact balance.

The same techniques can be used for cleaning and performing other tasks. For example, when cleaning the floor, it can be divided into a grid the same way as described for searching. When using these patterns to wash dishes, the concentric circle pattern is typically more effective. Move the cloth or sponge in circular motions over one side of a dish. As you move over the surface, make sure the cleaning movements overlap the previous ones. Turn the dish over and use the same technique on the other side. The sense of touch can be used to find missed spots; they will feel sticky, greasy, or grimy. Wash those spots again and rinse.

Hand-to-Hand Coordination

Hand-to-hand coordination is the visually impaired person's alternative to eye-hand coordination. This is done by using both hands, one as a guide and the other to perform the task. For example, to insert a key in a lock, locate and place your non-dominant hand's index finger over the keyhole. With your dominant hand, bring the key to the finger over the hole. Remove the finger and insert the key. This same technique can be used to replace a light bulb, insert a screwdriver into a screw, put bread into a toaster, and other similar tasks. What tasks can you think of where hand-to-hand coordination might help?

Landmarks and Clues

The standard definition landmark is anything permanent that helps identify where a person is, such as a fire hydrant or railroad tracks located a block from the local post office. A clue is similar to a landmark, but it can be moved or function intermittently. For example, finding the drug store by the aroma of coffee from the coffee shop next door doesn't work if the coffee shop is closed.

Landmarks and clues are generally thought of as techniques you use when traveling in places outside the home. However, they can be utilized just as frequently in the household setting. In the home, the front door, the kitchen stove, or the fireplace can serve as landmarks and good reference points for indoor orientation. Sounds in the home or things that may be moved, such as furniture in the living room, are still helpful but are considered clues

because they aren't permanent. Anything changeable, such as a sound or movable item, is a useful clue but cannot be counted on in the same way as a landmark. For example, the refrigerator serves as a landmark, but the family room's recliner is just a clue. The wind chimes used for staying oriented in the backyard aren't helpful if there is no wind, but the large tree near the back steps can be considered a landmark.

The concept of orientation by clues and landmarks is not just for getting around. It can also be used for small items and locating something in particular to the things around it. For example, if it is difficult to navigate and identify buttons on the remote, try using landmarks. First, scan the entire remote, using your fingers in a systematic search pattern. Pay attention to how the buttons are arranged. Are they organized in groups? Are there any you've never used? Where are these groups located—in the middle, at the top, or the bottom? Are some of the buttons square while others are round or shaped like arrows? Are any groups arranged like a telephone keypad?

It is helpful to have someone with vision help you isolate the buttons that get used most frequently. Mark them with a piece of tape, rubber band, or some other tactile marking. Many people mark the number five of the keypad with a raised dot and use it as a landmark to move to the other numbers. Don't mark all of the buttons, just the ones that can help identify the others.

Organization

Organization is one of the most essential tools for a person who is blind or visually impaired. Think of the old expression, "everything has a place and everything in its place." Following this rule saves time, reduces frustration, improves safety, and is essential for people with vision loss. Some of the organization methods are different for people with vision loss because the purpose of organization is to reduce confusion and help identify items. Items need to be grouped by various categories, such as organizing clothes by color rather than style or matching items. Containers to confine items are also vital in organizing for people with vision loss. It might not be helpful to have all of your socks together in one drawer if you can't tell them apart. Using bags, baskets, plastic containers, and dividers will improve

organization. Methods for organization are covered in greater detail in lesson 9.

Summary

This lesson covers several tools for people with visual impairment to use for daily tasks. Most activities and tasks will use multiple tools at the same time. Some concepts, such as spatial orientation, are utilized in all tasks but are more critical at times. Methods such as visualization are probably familiar and will need to be more frequently used. Hand-to-hand coordination takes more practice. The last and most important tool to add is common sense. You have a toolbox filled with tools. Use them all and keep adding to your toolbox. You have likely developed adaptations as you have learned to cope with vision loss. If these work and are safe, keep using them, and keep building additional adaptive strategies. With practice, whatever tasks you are trying to accomplish, you will have the necessary tools to make it possible.

Suggested Activities

- Practice visualizing areas in or around your home, which are difficult to navigate. Spend 10 minutes going through all of the details.
- Try using the tools described in this lesson with your daily tasks. Identify which ones you are applying for each activity.
- Make a list of your home areas that need to be organized so you'll be prepared when you get to that lesson.