

Imagine yourself . . . low vision or blind

Imagine you walk into a meeting room with the blackout blinds closed and only bits of sunlight breaking up the black. The room is clearly full of people and you know this because you can just make out the shadows of people sitting around, and you can hear them all talking about how it's Robert's 30th birthday and a scramble of voices are chattering about how he got a new car for his birthday. Someone notices you and calls out 'Hy Jan, have a seat', but you don;t know where the seats are, who is in the room and if there is even birthday cake!

What would you need to happen so that you feel understood here?

Communication tips: blind or low vision

In general:

- Remember, emotions are like gatekeepers for information. The person won't hear your message unless they feel safe and can trust you.
- Be aware that trauma can sit behind apparently irrational or disengaged behaviour.
- Ensure a quiet, calm environment where possible to minimise stress.
- Try to assess the person's communication needs at the outset and adjust your communication style accordingly.
- Check if the person needs a support person or companion with them.
- Speak to the person not their companion.
- Speak normally. Don't exaggerate your speech or movements.
- Introduce yourself by name.
- Address the person by name
- Be patient and give your undivided attention.
- Listen carefully and avoid assuming too much.
- Don't patronise or talk down to the person.
- Inform the person of what you are about to do; say why; and say what you need them to do for you.
- Stop and check comprehension from time to time.
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person to do or say something.
- Relax. Anyone can make mistakes. Offer an apology if you feel you've caused embarrassment. Keep a sense of humour and be willing to communicate.

Specifically:

- Ensure a clear path and space around the person so they have safe access to and from.
- Say something when you enter the room to indicate your presence.
- Speak clearly and in a normal voice. There is no need to raise your voice.
- Verbalise relevant thoughts or feelings – remember that visual cues and facial expressions will most likely be missed.
- Check accessibility features when producing electronic documents, eg Word or pdf files
- Leave the guide dog alone, if there is one. When in harness, the dog is working.
- Say something when you leave the room to indicate that you are leaving. This ensures that the person will not be embarrassed by speaking to an empty space.