

Why social distancing is a challenge for the blind, and what can be done about it

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Social distancing rules can be difficult to follow.

We all have been inside [grocery stores](#) and see tape on the floor marking off six feet. And the stickers designating one-way aisles.

We've seen the photos of people cramming into beaches in parts of Florida. Miami-Dade will open parks, marinas and golf courses on Wednesday—with new rules to follow.

Now, imagine you are blind or have compromised vision. How do you manage to navigate [public spaces](#) under the [coronavirus](#) restrictions?

"As a totally blind CEO, I like to shake hands and even hug because it gives me feedback which every sighted person gets without touching. Is this person tall, short, fat, skinny, with sweaty hands, large hands, petite hands? The touch of the person also gives me a sense of direction, as to where to look when talking to that person. With [social distancing](#), this tactile information is lost," said Virginia Jacko, Miami Lighthouse for the Blind's chief executive officer.

Closed spaces, like elevators, can be "a petri dish full of germs" and particularly challenging for the visually impaired, Jacko said.

"Regrettably, I cannot see whether someone is on an elevator when it arrives on my floor and by the time I ask, "Oh, is anyone on the elevator?" and they reply, the elevator door attempts to close, since newer elevators are designed not to hold the door open," she said.

'Blind Side of Living'

Motivational speaker Mike Lance, who is blind, hosts a call-in program for the blind and visually impaired, reached out to the Miami Herald recently. "We do not talk about the situation from a blind person's perspective. How do you do social distancing—staying six- to eight-feet apart? Most blind people are scared of this situation and don't know how to deal with it," he said.

Blind since birth, Lance, 56, says he is independent and enjoys walks around his Aventura neighborhood. But, with a mask on, he finds the experience a bit disorienting, a not uncommon feeling in these strange new times. He has previously hosted a radio reader's service on the former WSBH 1490 AM in the 1990s.

Today, he hosts "Talk Shop" and the "Blind Side of Living" and discusses the coronavirus and how it affects the visually impaired on these call-in-only programs (via 712-432-6498.)

We reached out to Miami Lighthouse about the challenges of being visually impaired in the current social distancing environment. Spokesman David Stiefel gathered a distillation of staff observations.

Social distancing and use of canes

"Social distancing creates different challenges for the visually impaired, depending on the level of their sight loss. The totally blind are completely reliant on their caning and auditory skills to maneuver in the current environment. Those with partial vision loss can rely on their visual cues to sense shapes and assist them. Many now resort to longer-than-usual canes and walk somewhat slower than usual to anticipate what is in front of them," Stiefel said.

Public transportation

Public transportation—including buses, Metrorail and Tri-Rail—poses particular challenges for the visually impaired, particularly those who are totally blind. One strategy suggested by staffers at the Lighthouse is to travel during periods of the day when there is less traffic and fewer pedestrians, such as early morning or evening hours.

Making touching safer

Touch is such an important sense for the visually impaired but when that is fraught with risk during the COVID-19 pandemic Lighthouse therapists suggested the wearing of long sleeves to minimize skin on surface contact, protective glasses and, if possible, gloves, along with face masks.

That advice can apply to the sighted, too. Yes, we know it's generally 90 degrees in South Florida.

"It is vital to remember to never touch your face, even when wearing gloves. In fact, wearing gloves can serve as a reminder not to touch one's face. The blind and visually impaired normally rely on their hands to guide them in specific situations. Now, they use their covered forearms and elbows to help guide them when fresh gloves are not a possibility," Stiefel said.

Using websites

Miami Lighthouse's Learning Services program offers children's educational opportunities in collaboration with Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Early Steps and the Early Learning Coalition.

One way in which they do so is through advances in technology.

"Websites can easily be made accessible, for example, by designing them with specialized toggles embedded on web pages to increase font sizes and color contrasts to accommodate the visually impaired," Jacko, the CEO, said.

"Similarly, descriptive text can be embedded in graphics to describe purely visual elements to the blind and equalize the level of available information. Consider the impact that the internet has on commerce, on education, on research and even on our politics and you will have some idea of how maximized website accessibility can benefit the lives of the blind."

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