

# Being Blind in a Social-Distanced World (Opinion)



Blind people rely on their sense of touch to navigate the world just as sighted people rely on their eyes. With no-touch rules of social distancing, the COVID-19 pandemic strips away this key component of their world, leaving the blind with even more obstacles to independence.

Consider this real-life example. After weeks of adhering to stay-at-home orders, an elderly blind woman decides it's high time for a haircut. She makes a hair appointment and contacts paratransit to get to the salon. When she gets there, no one will touch her. Not one person is comfortable enough to lightly grasp her elbow and guide her to her hairdresser's chair. She waits for 20 minutes. No one steps up, so services are declined. She calls paratransit, waits the usual hour and a half for pickup and goes home, hair still flopping into her face, frustrated and embarrassed.

A similar situation is happening at grocery stores. In usual times, a blind person who is alone can make his or her way to customer service, where a staffer volunteers to help with shopping. But now, with fears of illness and social distancing requirements, staff members willing to guide a blind person are hard to find. And if everyone decides to keep their distance, the blind person goes home without groceries feeling hungry and weak.

In another instance, many blind people get around well outside using their White Canes. In this time of social distancing, however, independently finding their way is harder. Sighted pedestrians used to assist blind people when needed, simple small acts of kindness. Today, blind people report that others are not helping - they're staying away. That extra help has disappeared.

So while our economy opens up for the majority of us, it is still slammed shut for the blind. This scenario is affecting the blind profoundly, especially those without family or friends to offer assistance. The elderly blind, who also are less likely to use technology to shop and communicate, also are particularly affected. Our blind neighbors are suffering tremendously during this pandemic. And no one really has noticed.

Even in the best of situations, blind people experience isolation as they interact in a sighted world. Now they feel even more alone. Without the benefit of touch - combined with the now universal fear of sickness and economic instability - our blind neighbors face frustration and depression. At the Lighthouse of Broward, we're seeing a sharp spike of clients taking advantage of our mental health services to help them through

this rough time.

Blind people tackle challenges every day that are hard to imagine by those with sight. Being prohibited to touch and be touched - and its profound impact on the lives of the blind - is just one of them. I would encourage my sighted friends to open their eyes and help when they see a blind person in need. Understand that a generous heart and an act of kindness make more of a difference than you would ever know.

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***Ellyn Drotzer, MSW, LCSW, is president and CEO of the Lighthouse of Broward, which provides specialized rehabilitation, life skills training, and employment opportunities that enhance the independence, productivity, and dignity of children and adults who are blind or visually impaired.***