

## **Wrong concepts about people with impaired vision**

**Step “Examining prejudice and discrimination” into the educational approach**

**Relevant for “visual impairment” type of disability**

### **Step by step description of the activity**

#### **Introduction**

“When a person loses his/her sight, he/she faces two major problems: on the one hand they need to learn skills and techniques, which can help them continue functioning as a productive member of the community and on the other hand should understand and learn how to deal with the attitude and the wrong concepts in society – attitude and concepts, which originate from our culture and manifest themselves in all aspects of our social behavior and thinking.”

Kenneth Jernigan “Blindness—Concepts and Misconceptions”

In the past, vision and our ability to see were associated with light, and light (natural or artificial) – with safety and security.

Blindness was connected with darkness and darkness with danger.

The blind man could not hunt effectively or dodge a spear cast in his direction.

The primitive conditions of jungle and cave life might not be a part of the agenda today. Primitive attitude towards blindness however perseveres.

**The stigma of the impairment can manifest itself in different ways:**

Social avoidance

Stereotypes – it might be considered that blind people are helpless, that they cannot make their own decisions or take care of themselves

Discrimination – refusal of employment or access to other opportunities

Condescending attitude, because they are considered helpless

Accusation – they can be accused due to their impairment or that they are taking advantage of it

People with impairments adopt towards themselves and towards their impairment the attitude of society – based on that, they are often worried and ashamed

**Reactions related to the stigma**

An attempt to hide the impairment

Pride with the impairment and joining groups, where the said impairment is shared by the members and where there is no feeling of stigmatization

Acute need for respect – many people with impairments are extremely sensitive towards the attitude towards their impairment

## Wrong concepts

### Wrong concept: “All blind people are the same”

„Oh, I know exactly what blind people can, because I know a blind person!”

If I know a blind person who is a really talented musician, I might believe that all blind people are excellent musicians.

The same goes for an employer, who hired a blind worker, who abuses alcohol – “They all drink too much!”

*“The loss of vision has nothing to do with my music focus. My passion for music was already there and it would be a huge mistake to give too much credit for that to my blindness”.* Andrea Bocelli

### Wrong concept: If something cannot be done by a sighted person, it is impossible for a blind one.

If a sighted person fails on a certain job, to the employer this means that the assignments are too complicated for execution and considering that even sighted people find them hard to manage, it is unthinkable for someone who is blind to be successful.

### Wrong concept: Blind people cannot participate in the life of the community; they cannot be expected to take responsibilities. They should receive, not give, as others are doing.

We all need to feel superior to someone else and this is rooted mainly in the fact that almost all of us feel insecure and inadequate — we seriously doubt our status and position. This is why sighted people feel uncomfortable when

- A blind person treats his colleagues
- Wants to leave a tip

- Or to make a donation ...

Often people come to the door of a blind person ask for donations and then turn away in embarrassment when they discover whom they are approaching. The blind people frequently insist to making a contribution and do so, but the suggestion that they should not be expected to assume responsibilities as others do, should not go unchallenged.

Even if there is no ill intent when people refuse tips or donations out of charity and kindness, these acts of charity and kindness are misplaced, and they are frequently the opposite of constructive forces.

### **Wrong concept: You can always tell if someone is blind**

Very often you cannot tell about the sight condition of a person by the appearance of their eyes.

Contemporary technologies offer possibilities, which make the eyes look normal even when the condition has changed their appearance.

### **Wrong concept: The blind have stronger hearing**

They learn to concentrate, to draw information out of the sounds and use it in innovative ways. Therefore, we speak of increased attention when listening and not of better hearing.

### **Wrong concept: You need to speak loudly and/or slow to the blind, otherwise they will not know that you speak to them.**

Nothing of the kind! It is interesting how some sighted people can simultaneously believe that the blind person is able to hear a needle drop in the next room, but not hear the words of the person standing beside them. In the general case, v.i. people have normal hearing. It is enough to start with their name or, if we do not know it, touch them very carefully and address them, in order to attract their attention.

### **Wrong concept: Most visually impaired people are completely blind**

Most blind people do not have a complete loss of vision. Many cannot distinguish colors, shapes and details, but have light perception.

Some have tunnel vision, others – peripheral. Some read large print, others have trouble focusing.

### **Wrong concept: All visually impaired people can read Braille**

Two factors contribute to this statement being untrue. On the one hand many children who can read large print progressively lose sight with age, but refuse to learn Braille or do not have a competent teacher. Next – all audio books, text to speech programmes and other methods encourage the v.i. to listen instead of read.

The problem with replacing reading/writing with listening is related to the way, in which the brain processes the information and the knowledge about correct writing, grammar, etc. Some blind people cannot read/write, but are highly functional. Many others are scientists!

### **Wrong concept: You should not use certain phrases when you speak to someone, who is v.i.**

They calmly use “I see what you mean” or „let’s see if we can figure something out“.

The metaphorical use of words such as “see” and “look” have no particular relation to sight as such.

### **Wrong concept: Counting steps is an effective method for moving around**

The blind, just like the sighted, use landmarks. They count streets, remember trees, detours, benches, etc.

What would happen if the blind person has a heavy backpack or a sprayed ankle? What if they stop to speak to a friend? What happens to counting steps? What if they decide to stop someplace else on the way? Counting

steps is ridiculous. It is the same thing as finding a friend's home by counting how many times our car wheels have rotated. Counting steps stops working with distances beyond 10 steps. All who have looked for a hidden treasure know this.

### **Wrong concept: The guide dogs know many places and thousands of commands**

Usually, the guide dogs know four to six commands more than an ordinary dog. Straight, left, right and stop are among those. We do not tell the dog to take us to the theatre and leave it to them.

The blind person navigates, otherwise they end up at the closest tree.

Blind people who use white canes have greater chances to find a job.

### **Instead of conclusion some advice when communicating with a person with an impairment:**

- Speak to them directly, even if they are accompanied by someone. Maintain visual contact with them.
- Use the regular phrases, do not sieve your words, wondering whether they are correct or not.
- Ask them how they would prefer to communicate. Youth who have a speech impediment might prefer to write.
- Use an appropriate tone and language according to the age of the person you are talking to, unless you are instructed differently.
- Do not interrupt and do not rush a person who is communicating slowly due to a speech impediment.
- Do not try to imagine what the person is trying to tell you. If you do not understand, ask for clarifications.
- Do not use words such as "tragedy" or "pain". People are not "chained" to a wheel chair, but "use" one.
- Do not fall in the trap of the golden rule, namely, how would I

feel/ behave if I were in the same position. Each individual case is different. Generalizations must be avoided.

„Social attitude towards the blind often turns into their own attitude towards themselves. They are a part of the society and are therefore prone to seeing themselves the way other people do. There is probably not a single blind person who has not underestimated themselves at least once at a certain point in their life.”

Kenneth Jernigan “Blindness—Concepts and Misconceptions”

Go to the video for some visualizations of the above, based on real cases, shared by youth people in Bulgaria.

### **Links to other resources**

<https://nfb.org/sites/default/files/images/nfb/publications/convent/blndnesc.htm> – “Blindness—Concepts and Misconceptions” by Kenneth Jernigan