



Running Guide for the Blind Tutorial

Making contact with a running partner

Trust is a key component to a successful sighted guide running experience. After all, the visually impaired runner is relying on the sighted guide to help minimize the risk of running into or tripping over obstacles during a run together.

Asking questions, respecting personal boundaries, being a good listener, and following through with your plans are just a few ways to lay the right foundation.

Prior to running the first time, it would be appropriate to ask the following:

1. What expectations does the visually impaired runner have of the sighted guide?
2. What pace and distances would you be expected to run together?
3. Can you describe your vision loss and how it impacts running?
4. Can you describe what sort of assistance and cues work best?

What qualities make a good guide?

Guiding a visually impaired runner is not rocket science. It takes a caring heart, good communication skills, dependability, openness to feedback, and assertiveness. Unless you are the person guiding the visually impaired runner during a race or on a tempo run, you don't necessarily have to be faster than the visually impaired runner. After all, even a visually impaired marathoner still will do slower recovery runs and shorter distances. Assertive guides are OK with interrupting a conversation to give cues or to pull a visually impaired runner out of the way if it's necessary to keep their runner safe.

It is normal for a new sighted guide to be a little nervous. This can mean that you take the responsibility seriously and want to do a good job. After jogging for a few miles with a visually impaired runner, you should expect to begin relaxing. It takes a little time to figure out what is necessary to verbalize. Mistakes will be made. Your best instructor will be the person you are guiding. Be open to feedback. If nervousness persists after the initial learning curve or interferes in your ability to communicate confidently and clearly, neither runner will be having fun.

I want to guide but I'm a busy person

All visually impaired runners should strive to have 6 to 8 regular running partners and are encouraged to always be training a new partner. When seeking sighted guides, VI

runners should be asking, "Would you be willing to guide me once or twice a month?" Some sighted guides may be able to run more frequently than this, but reliance on one or two sighted

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guides can end up standing in the way of everybody reaching their own goals. Life changes, illness, and life impact all of us, even volunteer guides.

I just want to guide for races

The best chance you have in guiding in a race is to be the sighted guide helping the VI runner train. While there are a few destination events that require guide recruitment, this is not the greatest need. VI runners need training partners multiple times per week. Getting to the start line of a race won't happen without volunteers sharing the training miles.

What are typical guiding methods?

1. Verbal cues only
2. Front to back (no tether): VI runner uses their limited vision to follow a guide. This may or may not require much verbal cuing. When verbal cuing is used, the guide typically calls out obstacles as the guide passes them. The VI runner will then mirror their movements to the sighted guide's movements in front of them.
3. Hand-held tether: This is typically a rope, shoe-string or strap with a loop on both ends, approximately 18-inches long. The preference of the material, length and size of loop varies. Typically, those with less vision run with shorter tethers
4. Rigid hand-held tether: Sighted guide and VI runner hold onto something such as a "white cane". The more rigid structure helps some feel more connected to their guide.
5. Waist-to-waist tether: A band is connected to belts or a loop around each runner's waist. It allows one to run without holding onto the tether. This sort of tether tends to be used by those with more functional vision or a lot of practice.
6. Elbow Lead: VI runner lightly holds onto the guide's arm just above the elbow

Please note that verbal cuing is always going to accompany tethered running. A more detailed description of verbal cues can be found below in the section entitled "Guiding Instructions". While visually impaired runners may have a specific guiding preference for training purposes, it's possible that a particular race may or may not allow your guiding method.

While some visually impaired runners have been known to tie themselves to their guide, this also poses risk to both runners in the event of a fall.

When guiding at a race, what is expected of the sighted guide?

- VI/Blind runners are encouraged to contact the race organizer prior to registering for a race so they know how sighted guides will be managed administratively. In all cases, the sighted guide should be required to at least complete a race day liability waiver form for the event. Race organizers routinely allow the sighted guides to participate in events gratis. After all, the sighted guided is merely there to "serve as the eyes" to the VI runner

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as they run their race. Please note, however, that this is an accommodation race organizers are making and that the event is incurring some cost for your participation since the guide will have the same access to all race-day supports and logistics. In this case, however, guides will not be entitled to an individual finish time, race shirt, etc... It is certainly appropriate to ask for these things up front, but this is not routine.

- Oftentimes, the most stressful part of an event for a VI/Blind runner is the logistics surrounding the event itself. Arriving early does a lot to reduce the race day logistical stressors.
- During the race itself, in addition to guiding, the sighted guide oftentimes will give the VI runner pacing feedback and grab the water cups from the volunteers.
- For longer running events, it is also routine for race organizers to allow a relay of guides. The number of guides and the exchange points will need to be determined in discussions with the race organizer. A relay of up to 4 sighted guides is typically acceptable with conditions.

Guiding Instructions

Here are some universal guidelines to use when guiding:

- 3-2-1 Countdown: This can be used when alerting the VI runner to various obstacles, turns or changes in footing. For example, “We will be stepping down a curb in 3-2-1, step down.” “There are some overhanging branches, so we’ll duck in 3-2-1 duck. All clear.” We’ll be making a hard right turn in 3-2-1, turn, turn, turn...”
- When in doubt, call it out. VI runners will be in tune with what they feel under their feet and what they hear. Even if something doesn’t present an obvious tripping hazard to a sighted runner such as a small puddle, pile of leaves, mud, gravel, acorns, or sand on a road surface, error on the side of alerting the VI runner to what is coming up if you must run through it. In many cases, you can steer the VI runner clear of these smaller changes.
- Always call out terrain changes. Announce transitions such as moving from pavement to cobblestone, or pavement to dirt or grass, when stepping onto a wooden bridge, cresting a hill, dips or bumps in a path, etc...
- When possible, announce what’s coming up. “We’ll be running downhill for a couple hundred yards and then the road flattens out.” “There is a cyclist (or runner) approaching us. They see us and they are on the other side of the path. Let’s stay where we are at.”
- Running single file. When passing through tight spaces, moving between tight obstacles such as poles in your path, or negotiating groups or cyclists, there are times you will need to run single file. If using a tether, the guide will announce, “We have an approaching cyclist so move behind me.” The guide will hold his tethered hand in the middle of his/her back so the VI runner can center behind the guide. The guide will initially need to speed up a tad to get in the right position. Since the tether is quite short, the VI runner will be holding his arm out in front to allow for enough space to avoid tripping the guide. Once the obstacle is clear, call out, “All clear,” and the VI runner can once again come

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alongside the guide. Running single file with a hand-held tether is a challenge so is normally only done for clearing brief obstacles that cannot be negotiated in any other way.

- The sighted guide will be a bumper. When running with a low vision or blind runner, there will be physical contact. When running with a hand-held tether, the sighted guide will be the “bumper” on one side. The tether provides the limit on the other side. It’s important that the guide holds their position within reason. When the VI runner accidentally bumps into the guide, the VI runner can correct their course. The guide must also be aware that the VI runner can quickly be close to 5 feet away from the guide in the other direction, even when they use an 18 inch tether because of arm length of two people. So, especially when negotiating turns or obstacles, the guide will want to provide verbal cues, run with their arm close to their body, and choke up on the tether. It’s quite common for low vision and blind runners to be running with their hands very close (even touching) when necessary to safely negotiate obstacles.
- Using touch cues. When running with a waist-to-waist tether or if no tether is being used at all, light touch prompts on the arm with verbal cues also help to provide directional cues. A gentle nudge or pull to course correct can be helpful. With that being said, most VI runners do not want to be pulled or grabbed unless there is imminent danger. If using touch cues, the guide runner team should talk about this in advance.
- Grabbing and yanking the VI runner out of the way is OK if words can’t come fast enough to avoid an obstacle.
- Elbow leads. This is commonly referred to as “sighted guide”. When with a VI runner, most likely they will not have their white cane with them. Therefore, before or after runs, the VI runner will hold onto your arm just above your elbow. It is NOT good to direct the VI runner by the guide holding onto the runner and pulling them around. This is generally considered to be offensive just as it would be for someone to pull a sighted person around by their arm. There are VI runners who prefer to hold onto their guide’s arm in this manner when jogging.
- It’s OK to tell the VI runner about your visual observations of what is going on around you. A colorful sunrise or sunset, flowers in bloom, or other beautiful, odd or funny things going on around you shouldn’t be kept secret.
- Practicing is encouraged. When mentally preparing for your first time guiding, practice some of the above techniques while running solo. This will allow you to work on your timing of cues and begin paying attention to the 3-D world around you that normally goes unnoticed. If you have a willing sighted partner who trusts you, blindfold them and take them for a slow jog. It can be equally helpful to blindfold yourself for a short practice jog, while being guided by a friend, so you develop a better sense of the types of cues that you would want to have if you could not see. If youth are going to serve as guides, it is highly advisable that they practice running blindfolded themselves with a friend prior to guiding a visually impaired runner.