

CNIB releases National Vision Health Report

After a long winter, May is literally like a breath of fresh air for most Canadians. Our surroundings transform from gray to green and the sight of sunny skies lift the spirits. For someone with vision loss, appreciation for spring comes instead through the warmth, scent and sounds of spring. May is Vision Health Month – an appropriate time to think about what life would be like without sight.

A new report shows that although one in three Canadians knows someone who is blind or partially sighted, almost 70 per cent feel there is a general stigma toward people with vision loss. The National Vision Health Report, commissioned by CNIB for Vision Health Month (May 2015), found that half of the respondents said they were not sure how to interact with or approach someone with vision loss, and only a third of Canadians believed people who are blind or partially sighted could take up sports or enjoy a movie.

“Considering that an estimated 2 million Ontarians have a major eye condition – age-related macular degeneration, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy or glaucoma – and are at serious risk of losing their sight, these findings are troubling,” said Chris McLean, Regional Director, CNIB Ontario-GTA. “It’s important for people to know that with rehabilitation training, people with vision loss can lead full, independent and active lives.”

Rehabilitation training teaches people the skills necessary to carry on with their lives without sight – such as travelling safely in their community, maintaining their home, and learning new ways of reading and writing.

“When families, employers and businesses are encouraged to recognize individuals who are blind or partially sighted as equal participants in society, communities become truly inclusive, healthy and vibrant,” said Yin Brown, Advocacy Manager, CNIB Ontario. “Relate to individuals with vision loss as you would to anyone else. Introduce yourself and ask what our abilities and wants may be. If we’re walking along confidently, there’s a good chance we don’t need help. But, if we look unsure, say hello to make your presence known and offer assistance.”

If you don’t already know someone with vision loss, it’s only natural to feel unsure about how to interact. The most important thing to remember is that people with vision loss are only different with respect to their vision. They do most of the same things as everyone else – from reading books to playing sports to doing crosswords (they just do them a bit differently). In fact, individuals who are blind or partially sighted often find other people’s beliefs about their lack of abilities to be a much larger barrier than vision loss itself.

When being introduced to someone with vision loss, say hello and wait for them to offer their hand to be shaken. Identify yourself by name and speak clearly using your natural voice and volume. Use everyday language. Don’t worry about using terms such as “see” and “look”. Individuals with vision loss use these terms, too.

If the person has a guide dog, don’t pet the animal while it is in harness (as tempting as this may be). They’re working dogs, and distracting them can be hazardous for the people they are guiding. If you’re giving directions, avoid saying things like, “it’s over there?”. Be as specific as you can, such as “that store is located north in the direction you’re already going, about two blocks away?”. Refrain from grabbing an individual with vision loss, but offer your elbow to provide guided assistance.

This May, open a dialogue with your family about vision loss. Ask questions like, “what would it be like to live without sight?” and “how should I interact with someone who is blind or partially sighted?”

Visit cnib.ca to learn more about living with blindness or partial sight, and post-vision loss rehabilitation therapy. To check out the National Vision Health Report, visit cnib.ca/visionhealthmonth