



Adapting to Vision Loss

2024 Chicago Social Work Conference

Older Adults Navigating the Journey of Adjustment

Jennifer Ottowitz, CVRT



1

Getting to Know You

- How many of you work with older adults?
- How many of you work with children?
- How many of you are blind or have low vision?
- How many of you have a family member or friend who has low vision?
- How many of you have worked with someone who is blind or has low vision?

2

Prevalence of Vision Impairment

- In 2019, about 3.16 million Americans age 65+ (7.3%) reported blindness or vision impairment (VI) when asked “Are you blind or do you have serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses?”
- Prevalence varies across and within states. E.g. in IL, 5.8% of those 65+ report VI; by county, range is from 2.2% to 13.6%.

(VisionServe Alliance, 2022)



PAGE 3

3

Prevalence of Vision Impairment

Highest prevalence:

- Women — 56% of VI population.

In U.S population.:

- 10.5% of African-Americans.
- 13.9% of Hispanics.
- 14.2% of Native Americans/Alaskan Natives.
- 6.3% aged 65-74.
- 9.8% aged 80+.

(VisionServe Alliance, 2022)



PAGE 4

4

Prevalence Projections

- In 2015, 3.23 million Americans 40+ were VI (BCVA 20/40 to 20/200).
- In 2050, projected 6.95 million VI; increase of 115.1%.
- In 2050, second highest prevalence of VI projected to shift from African-American (16.3%) to Hispanics (20.3%).
- Continued higher prevalence of blindness for women and those 80+.

(Varma et al., 2016)



PAGE 5

5

Prevalence Projections

- In 2015, 1.02 million Americans 40+ reported as blind (BCVA 20/200 or less).
- In 2050, 2.01 million projected blind; increase of 97.1%.
- In 2015, 8.2 million with uncorrected refractive error.
- In 2050, projected 16.4 million with uncorrected refractive error; increase of 100%.

(Varma et al., 2016)



PAGE 6

6

Implications of Living with Vision Loss

- Increased risk for falls (Varma Et al., 2016).
- High rates of other health conditions including diabetes, stroke, hearing loss, and dementia (Varma et al., 2016; Ghasemi Et al., 2016).
- Increased risk for depression (VisionAware, N.D.; Parravano Et al., 2021).



PAGE 7

7

Implications of Living with Vision Loss

- Social isolation and lack of social relationships (VisionAware, n.d.; Orr, n.d.).
- More likely to experience poverty and lower incomes (VisionServe Alliance, 2022).
- Challenges with employment and volunteer opportunities (McDonnall & Cmar, 2024; Tuttle & Tuttle, 2004).
- Roles within the family may change and evolve (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2004).



PAGE 8

8

Common Family Reactions

- Overprotectiveness.
- Embarrassment.
- Denial.
- Restructuring of family roles and responsibilities.
- Periods of heightened stress as adjustment and acceptance occur.



PAGE 9

9

**The process of adjustment is a
journey along a path.**



PAGE 10

10

Adjustment and Acceptance

- Adjustment is changing to meet life's demands.
- Acceptance is an internal consent to living with a vision impairment.

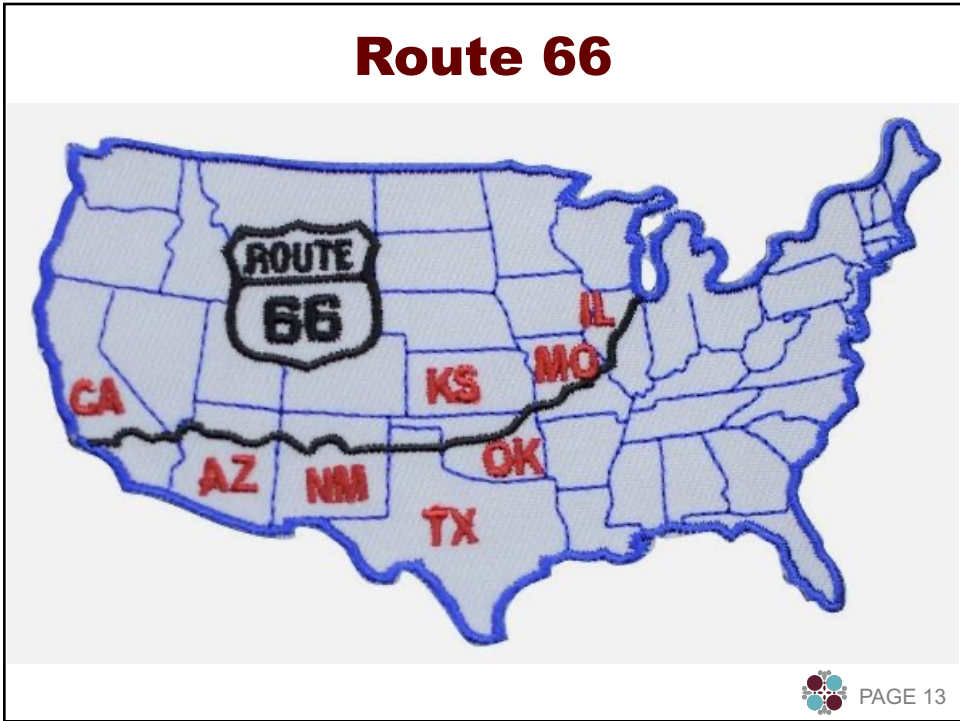
11

Who Goes Through Adjustment?

- Someone experiencing a sudden loss of vision.
- Someone experiencing gradual vision loss.
- Someone who is born blind or vision impaired.
- Someone who acquires vision loss at any age.
- Someone with a functional vision loss.
- Family members/members of the support network.

12

Route 66



13

Hana Highway



14

Adjustment Process

- Identified by Dean and Naomi Tuttle (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2004).
- Each person progresses at their own pace.
- No set timeframe.
- May move back and forth through stages.
- Amount of vision lost is not always equal to amount of challenges with adjustment.

More Than Just an Eyeball with Feet

- Treat the person as a whole.
- Each person is unique.
- Consider intersectionality.
- Identify basic needs.



How You Can Help

- Reframe thinking.
- Identify and validate emotions.
- Share resources to change behaviors and promote positive action.
- Connect individuals with peer support groups.

Stages of Adjustment

Reaction Stages

- Trauma.
- Shock and denial.
- Mourning and withdrawal.
- Succumbing and depression.

Rebuilding Stages

- Reassessment and reaffirmation.
- Coping and Mobilization.
- Self-acceptance and self-esteem.

(Tuttle & Tuttle, 2004)

Trauma Stage

- Numbness or inactivity; trying to absorb what has happened.
- What hit me?
- Influenced by age, life experiences, how someone perceives themselves, and the strength of their self-esteem.

How You Can Help

- Begin to build trust in the relationship by listening.
- Verify the vision loss with kind and gentle understanding.
- Provide direct and simple frankness without pity or condescension.

Shock and Denial Stage

- This isn't happening to me.
- Searching for the miracle cure, medical breakthrough, or scientific discovery that will restore vision.
- Doctor hopping.
- May engage in risky behavior.

21

How You Can Help

- Accept them where they are; do not be an adversary.
- Use “and” instead of “but”. — “You feel you are doing well with cooking and if you start to feel unsafe, we can sign you up for training.”
- Use future planning by tabling an idea to revisit in a month or so to see how things are going.

22

How You Can Help

- Listen patiently.
- Provide comfort, support, and understanding.
- Provide factual information that is easy to understand.

Mourning and Withdrawal Stage

- Poor me.
- Sadness and withdrawal.
- Feeling sorry for a perceived loss of adequacy, self-esteem, equality, belongingness, and control.
- Sudden outburst or constant irritability.
- Some resentment of well-intended encouragement may occur; often directed at people closest to them.

How You Can Help

- Continue to listen and build the trusting relationship; sometimes people want/need someone to sit in the darkness with them to hold their hand.
- Give permission to grieve.
- Establish a schedule for activities.
- Break the cycle with changes in diet and exercise; find positive stress-reducing activities.

How You Can Help

- Suggest peer support groups.
- Provide resources and easily mastered, practical solutions to personal and social problems.

Succumbing and Depression Stage

- I can't.
- Some describe this as “giving in” because of a real or perceived loss of personal freedom and independence. The areas of loss vary and can include income, travel/ability to drive, recreational activities, social interactions, etc.
- Also described as the D's—despair, discouragement, disinterest, distress, despondency, and disenchantment.

How You Can Help

- Depression may be a common fact of life; however, serious and prolonged depression is not. With support of family, friends, and professionals the depressive states become less intense and frequent.
- Make referrals to mental health professionals if signs of clinical depression occur.

How You Can Help

- Schedule a 10-minute pity party.
- Redirect thought patterns onto the good and positive.
- Redirect mental energies to setting realistic goals, developing social contacts, and other appropriate activities.
- Provide insight about the adjustment process to families.

Are You With Me?



Reassessment and Reaffirmation Stage

- Life is still worth living.
- Who am I?
- Recognition that many personal attributes present before vision loss remain.
- Identify strengths and limitations.
- Turning point.

How You Can Help

- Encourage that different is not “bad”.
- Provide realistic feedback without patronizing or condescension.
- Clarify attitudes and feelings.
- Help individual gain insights into strengths and desires.
- Help person establish realistic and attainable goals.

Coping and Mobilization Stage

- I can.
- Focused on learning new skills and developing resources.
- Often most successful in vision rehabilitation training.
- May feel self-conscious in public.
- May fear failure.

How You Can Help

- Connect individual to vision rehabilitation services for training.
- Provide encouragement and support.
- Encourage the individual to take an active role in planning activities.
- Recognize accomplishments and successes.

Self-Acceptance and Self-Esteem Stage

- I like me.
- Acceptance of strengths, limitations, assets, and liabilities.
- Self-approval and self-respect.
- Continuous process.

How You Can Help

- Provide feedback that life is as rich and full as you want it to be.
- Instill a desire to grow in self-understanding and problem-solving skills.
- Discourage “as if” and “if only” games.
- Educate family and support network about vision loss and how to assist/support their loved one.

Where do we go from here?

37

Resources

- [Talking Book Program](#)
- [Hadley](#)
- [APH Connect Center](#)
- [Time to Be Bold from OIB-TAC](#)

38

Resources

- [Practical Tips for Social Workers New to Interacting with Older Adults Experiencing Vision Impairment or Blindness course](#)
- [Adjustment and Acceptance of Blindness and Low Vision course](#)
- [Facilitating Family Support course](#)
- [OIB-TAC webinars and other courses](#)

Other Ways You Can Help

- Consider your own personal biases, misconceptions, or attitudinal barriers toward blindness or disability.
- Avoid assumptions; meet people where they are.
- Work with the person to empower vs. helping which becomes enabling/dependent.
- Educate on tips for self-advocacy.

More Ways You Can Help

- Learn about types of vision impairment and their functional implications.
- Become familiar with local and state vision rehabilitation services/organizations.
- Use descriptive language.
- Offer adaptations—the power of a signature guide.
- Ask questions.

Continuing the Journey

- Remember older adults are multi-faceted; blindness/vision impairment is only one of those facets.
- Validate the often difficult journey of adjustment and offer hope.
- Empower older adults to communicate to others how they can be supported to achieve goals for independence and quality of life.

References

- Ghasemi, H., Pourakbari, M. S., Entezari, M., & Yarmohammadi, M. E. (2016). Association of age-related macular degeneration and age-related hearing impairment. *Journal of Ophthalmic & Vision Research*, 11(1), 54.
- McDonnell, M. C., & Cmar, J. L. (2024). Employment and retirement among workers who develop vision loss in midlife. *Work (Reading, Mass.)*, 10.3233/WOR-230669. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-230669>
- Orr, A. L. (n.d.). Social isolation and loneliness among older adults and their relationship to vision loss. *VisionAware*. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from <https://visionaware.org/get-connected/about-visionaware/information-for-professionals-who-serve-older-adults-who-are-blind-or-low-vision/articles-related-to-aging-and-vision-loss/social-isolation-and-loneliness-among-older-adults-and-their-relationship-to-vision-loss/>
- Parravano, M., Petri, D., Maurutto, E., Lucenteforte, E., Menchini, F., Lanzetta, P., Varano, M., van Nispen, R. M. A., & Virgili, G. (2021). Association between visual impairment and depression in patients attending eye clinics: A meta-analysis. *JAMA Ophthalmology*, 139(7), 753-761.

References

- Tuttle, D. W. & Tuttle, N. R. (2004). *Self-Esteem and Adjusting with Blindness: The Process of Responding to Life's Demands* (3rd ed.), Charles Thomas Publishing Ltd., Springfield, MO.
- Varma, R., Vajaranant, T. S., Burkemper, B., Wu, S., Torres, M., Hsu, C., Choudhury, F., & McKean-Cowdin, R. (2016). Visual impairment and blindness in adults in the United States: Demographic and geographic variations from 2015 to 2050. *JAMA Ophthalmology*, 134(7), 802-809.
- VisionAware (n.d.). Social determinants of health: Their relation to vision, aging, and advocacy. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from <https://visionaware.org/get-connected/about-visionaware/information-for-professionals-who-serve-older-adults-who-are-blind-or-low-vision/articles-related-to-aging-and-vision-loss/social-determinants-of-health-their-relation-to-vision-aging-and-advocacy/>
- VisionServe Alliance (2022). *United State's Older Population and Vision Loss: A Briefing*, St. Louis.



Older Individuals who are Blind Technical Assistance Center

The Older Individuals who are Blind Technical Assistance Center (OIB-TAC) is a development of the National Research & Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision (NRTC) at Mississippi State University, focused on providing training and technical assistance to designated State agencies (DSAs) or other providers of independent living services for older individuals who are blind that are funded with OIB funds. This grant, H177Z200001, is funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) under the U.S. Department of Education.

 PAGE 45

45



Older Individuals who are Blind Technical Assistance Center

Name: Jennifer Ottowitz

Email: jottowitz@colled.msstate.edu

Phone: 662-325-2001

For more information, please contact:

OIB-TAC: www.oib-tac.org

NRTC: blind.msstate.edu
ntac.blind.msstate.edu
www.facebook.com/theNRTC
www.twitter.com/MSU_NRTC

P.O. Box 6189
 205 Morgan Avenue
 Mississippi State, MS 39762
 P. 662.325.2001

 PAGE 46

46