

Social Distancing When You Can't See the Distance

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Pam Hogle

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Guest post by Deni Elliott

Guiding Eyes Koala gives me advance warning when we are about to cross paths with another dog. I can feel added tension in the rigid handle attached to her harness. She keeps walking us straight down the sidewalk, but as the person and dog get closer, I can feel Koala rise up. She walks on her tippy-toes, restraining herself from sniffing as we scoot past the dog.

A person alone on the sidewalk is way less interesting; as far as Koala is concerned, they might as well be a trash can to walk around. In that case, Koala is likely to walk by without giving any indication that there is something that needs my attention. It isn't until I hear footsteps that I realize that the obstacle we are passing is a living, breathing human being.

In this period of cautiously returning to public contact, what my guide dog communicates has become an urgent matter of concern. Guide dogs know how to squeeze and weave themselves and their partners around any obstacles. They aren't likely to understand the concept of staying six feet away from others. So, the question for people who are blind or visually impaired is: How can we manage social distancing when we can't see the distance?

I've found that the answer depends on how crowded your community is and on whether the guide dog team is navigating outside or inside.

In areas with lower population and more attuned neighbors, if people see a guide dog working in harness, they may naturally cross the street or provide space. In high population areas or where sighted people are more focused on their phones than on other pedestrians, the guide dog handler will have to take a more proactive approach.

When walking on harness outside, if the guide dog signals that another dog is nearby, the handler should ask the person approaching to keep the distance. "Please stay six feet away," is normally all that is required.

It's harder when your guide gives no warning, and the handler suddenly finds herself shoulder-to-shoulder with someone on the sidewalk. Again saying, "Please stay six feet away," is kinder than shouting, "Can't you see that I'm blind?"

Working a dog in harness inside in the COVID-19 era provides new challenges that most guide dog teams can't overcome on their own. Some grocery stores have designated aisles as one-way. Any place open for business has six-foot markers for people standing in line at the check-out counter. People with visual impairments are not likely to see any of this. It is kind for sighted shoppers to offer directions, but unfortunately, many sighted people just stop and stare.

The blind or visually impaired person can do some advance planning to make the trip to the store as efficient as possible. If the store has special hours for vulnerable populations, it is good to take advantage of the smaller crowd and the likelihood that the other shoppers will also be working to keep distance. This is one time that it is a good idea to call the store in advance, explaining to the manager that the need for employee assistance. That helper can quickly locate items and help the guide dog team stay out of the way of others, while everyone maintains a six-foot distance.

Some people have pulled out their long white canes as an additional signal for sighted people to keep the right distance. Others who aren't coordinated enough to handle the dog in harness on one side and cane on the other – I'm one of those – may need to provide additional visual cues for those around them. Vests, tank tops, and tee shirts that say "BLIND" or "VISUALLY IMPAIRED" in high contrast are used by athletes and are available at ruseen.com. These draw more attention to disability than most of us would like in our daily lives. But at this time in the world, it is better to be noticed than infected.