

How Can You Be Blind If You Can See?

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People sometimes doubt the truthfulness of individuals who say that they are legally blind. They make comments such as, "He's as blind as I am" or "He sees what he wants to see." These statements reflect a lack of understanding of what it means to be legally blind.

The term "legal blindness" means that a person has such poor vision that they are unable to rely on that vision to accomplish certain activities or tasks. The technical definition is 20/200 acuity in the better eye, with correction, or a 20-degree field or less. The actual amount and type of vision that a legally blind person has varies from person to person. Also, there are many conditions that affect a person's vision such as lighting, weather and medication.

People who have Retinitis Pigmentosa, or some people who have had strokes, usually have good central vision but no side vision. They can often read print (sometimes with special glasses) but everything else is blurry. It is possible that they would recognize the face of their bus driver but need a white cane to walk safely. Those with Macular Degeneration cannot see what is directly in front of them but can make good use of their side vision. It is possible for this person to spot a piece of bright lint on the carpet but be unable to see food on the plate in front of them. (Someone once said to me, "I can sometimes spot an ant but I'd walk into an elephant.")

It is impossible to judge how well a person can see by looking at their eyes. Most legally blind people have eyes that appear normal. Many legally blind people wear glasses to improve their residual vision or they continue wearing glasses out of habit. Most, but not all, legally blind people wear sunglasses to reduce the discomfort caused by glare. Some legally blind people use a white cane.

Now that you know the meaning of the term legal blindness, share this information with other people. They will learn not to make inaccurate and/or hurtful comments about their legally blind relative, friend, colleague or neighbor.