

MAKE EXERCISE ACCESSIBLE FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

by Karlie Intlekofer, Ph.D.

As a fitness professional, you want to make exercise accessible to everyone. But have you ever considered how you could help those with visual impairment achieve their fitness goals? With population aging on the horizon, it's now more important than ever to create inclusive environments to address the physical health and well-being of people with visual disabilities.

The Facts About Visual Impairment

The truth is that visual impairment occurs in about 8% of adults, a number expected to more than double by 2050. Furthermore, 25% of adults over age 70 are already visually impaired. These individuals tend to have lower fitness and strength, a deficit that often starts in childhood and reflects fewer opportunities for physical activity. In addition to lower activity levels, visual impairment often comes with a higher risk of mental health issues and a lower quality of life. Compared to those without vision loss, they have higher rates of anxiety and depression and have more loneliness and hopelessness. Worse still, they report significant difficulties in commercial fitness facilities, with many facilities lacking accessible equipment and others refusing their participation outright. All these factors put people with visual impairment at high risk for withdrawing from daily activities and social roles, including regular exercise.

VISUAL IMPAIRMENT describes vision loss that can range from partial sight and color blindness to complete blindness. Remember, vision loss is not always obvious, as many forego dark glasses, a white cane or a guide dog. Instead of making assumptions, your staff should ask what exercise participants need for support and guidance.

Actions for Inclusivity & Accessibility

If you're ready to make your fitness facility more welcoming to people of all abilities, consider the following:

- **Perform Accessibility Audits**

  Arrange equipment according to accessibility guidelines, ensuring clear pathways and exits. Identify areas for improvement to serve a diverse community effectively.

- **Communicate Clearly**

  Train your staff to understand and communicate the facility's accommodations for individuals with different abilities. Provide information in large print or braille and identify areas suitable for those with visual deficits.

- **Provide Accessible Equipment Orientations**

  Train your staff to deliver personalized equipment orientations, even for fitness facilities lacking specific equipment. Understanding the needs of the people you serve ensures appropriate equipment matches for their abilities.

- **Emphasize Accessibility During Tours**

  During facility tours, highlight your commitment to accessibility. Consider staff training to communicate how your organization is actively working toward a more inclusive environment, especially for conditions that may not be obvious like visual impairment.

- **Choose Technology Carefully**

  Keep in mind that those with low visual acuity prefer large, high-contrast LED interfaces to touchscreen consoles on cardio equipment.

- **Be Mindful of Marketing**

  Make sure to include diverse bodies and physical capabilities in your marketing materials. Facilities with a narrow range of representation are perceived as more intimidating, leading those who don't fit body or capability ideals to feel unwelcome or even oppressed.

- **Ask for Feedback**

  Encourage the people you serve to share feedback on their experience, helping your staff understand their unique challenges and address their concerns in your facility.

Exercise for Everyone

In the coming decades, it will be essential for fitness professionals everywhere to recognize and address the unique challenges faced by individuals with visual impairment. By implementing the expert insights outlined here and continually seeking feedback from the people you serve, you can ensure that exercise is truly accessible for everyone, no matter what their abilities.



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