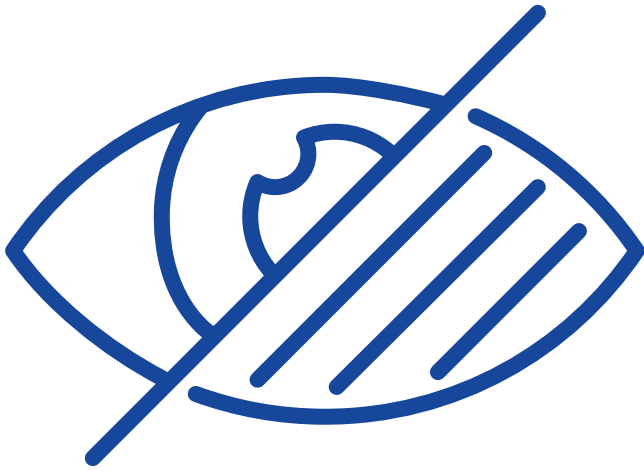


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# A BRIEF GUIDE TO VISUAL IMPAIRMENT



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# THE BASICS OF GOOD HELP

Just as sightedness is only one of the many other characteristics of sighted people, visual impairment is also only one of the many other characteristics of partially sighted people. They have different personalities, come from different backgrounds, and have different relationships with visual impairment, so they have different preferences in, among other things, asking for help and the amount and method of assistance. The points below provide a general guide, but the golden rule is to be open and ask questions.

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# Designation

„Visually impaired” is a collective term; it **includes the categories „blind” and „low vision”**. These classifications vary and are defined differently by medicine, law and pedagogy. The bottom line is that visual impairment can be very diverse, depending, for example, on visual acuity, field of vision, perception of contrasts, and speed of adaptation to changes in light. Thus, a person considered legally blind may have some remaining vision and is not completely blind or a person who can see relatively well up close still needs a white cane or a guide dog to get around in the city.

- In general, **the terms „visually impaired people” or „blind and partially sighted people” are accepted**. Of course, there may be personal preferences. For example, a person who has been blind since birth defines themselves as a „blind” person and not a „visually impaired” person since, in their interpretation, they do not have and never had vision that could have been impaired.

## Word usage

Sighted people often get themselves into unpleasant situations by overthinking, for example, the importance of „see you soon.”

- The truth is that visually impaired people use the farewell „see you soon” in the same way—in fact, in the same way as sighted people. They can also talk about the movie they „saw” at the cinema or „look” it on their calendar to see if they can catch it on the weekend.

So these expressions are not offensive; feel free to use them.

## Is visual impairment a taboo or not?

**Basically, it's not.** Don't feel bad for being interested in this subject. However, **it is vital that you always consider the situation** where, when and from whom you ask about visual impairment.

- While you can safely ask about a new acquaintance, friend, or colleague's visual impairment in addition to many other things related to them (e.g., family, hobbies), do not automatically start asking about the sight of the visually impaired person whom you just helped find a seat on the train.
- Of course, there can also be differences here, such as personal preferences. It is possible that the visually impaired passenger taking a seat on the train is happy to talk about this topic and any other topic because they are simply that kind of person. It is also possible that the new colleague does not like to talk about it because, for example, the loss of vision is recent, or they themselves are not reconciled to their vision impairment. Respect if you get a negative answer.

## Greeting and addressing

It is important to remember that we acquire 80% of the information about the world around us through vision. Since this 80% falls out to varying degrees, people with visual impairments call on their other senses for help and use them to the maximum to obtain information. Many people mistakenly think that blind and partially sighted people have superpowers such as superhearing; the reality is that since they are not distracted by sight, the cavalcade of the visible world, they pay much more attention to what or who they hear. In this way, it is possible for visually impaired people to remember and recognize the voices of family members, friends, and acquaintances and to know who they are talking to. However, this also

depends on the situation. With the following small changes you can make the life of visually impaired people, who cannot lean on visual cues, easier.

- If, for example, you run into a visually impaired friend on the street, they might recognize you from the first sound of „hello”, but it could also be that the street is noisy, you didn't speak loud enough, or they weren't paying attention. Thus, **if you meet a visually impaired person you know, you should always say hello by saying the person's name and who you are:** Hi Claire! It's Julie. Good day, Claire! I'm Julia, from next door.
- **You should also use the name of the visually impaired person if you are in a group situation**, e.g. a group of friends or a meeting at work. In the absence of eye contact, it is not always easy for a visually impaired friend or colleague to judge that you have spoken to them, asked them a question and are waiting for an answer. Say, for instance: Can you tell me what happened over the weekend, Claire?, Claire, what do you think about this?
- If you want to draw the attention of an unknown visually impaired person to you, **some verbal identification can also be a solution:** Lady with the white cane, here is an empty seat if you want to sit down. Or the gentleman with the guide dog! The street is closed due to construction, so your dog stopped.
- Alternatively, you can draw attention to yourself by **gently touching the visually impaired person's shoulder** and then asking: [touch] Can I help you cross the road? or [tap] The train is very crowded, but there is an available seat further away. Would you like to sit down?
- It is essential that, as far as the situation allows (you did not save the visually impaired person from stepping in front of a speeding truck), **use a normal volume and a careful touch.** Yelling or grabbing an arm can be scary for a visually impaired person.

# HELPING

As seen from the above examples, if the situation allows, **always ask first** and only act afterwards.

- **Ask the visually impaired person if they need help.**
- **If you get a negative answer, respect it**, don't insist, and don't get offended. Think about the fact that just as you like to act independently, a visually impaired person also wants to do the same. They draw confidence from being able to get around independently in the city, for example.
- If you get an affirmative answer, the next question is, **„How can I help you?“** This step is also very important because, depending on the situation and the visually impaired person's preferences, the help's method and extent may change. It is possible that they need directions, it is possible that on a more complicated route, it is better to accompany the visually impaired person, or it is also possible that they are just waiting for someone. You can help by showing them the bench a few steps away so that they spend their time more comfortably waiting.

In the situations above, there are some basic techniques that you can use to help you provide assistance more smoothly.

## Providing directions

If you want to give directions to a visually impaired person, try to imagine yourself in their place. You can easily see that you don't use the expressions „here,“ „there,“ „this,“ or „that“, and the associated hand gestures.

- Try to use the expressions **„to the right“, „to the left“, „in front“ or „behind“**.
- In addition, you can **use the face of the clock as a guide** for more precise directions. Imagine that the visually impaired

person is standing in the centre of the clock face; opposite them is the number 12, behind them is the number 6, to their right, is the number 3, and to their left is the number 9. So, for example, you can tell them that there is a bench at 11 o'clock instead of sending them slightly to the left, then turning them to the right and directing them forward.

## Sighted guide technique

If necessary, offer to guide the blind or partially sighted person to the desired location.

- **It is important that the visually impaired person is never held or grabbed by the sighted person.** Doing so can result in pulling them this way and that or pushing them in front of you, which can cause them to fear you.
- **The correct solution is for you to offer your arm yourself** - ideally by standing on the side of the visually impaired person's free hand (so not the hand holding the white cane) - **which the visually impaired person holds slightly above your elbow** (some may prefer holding on the shoulder of the sighted person and not the elbow). In this way, you are really leading them because **they follow you about half a step behind.**

## Narrow spaces

When you lead the visually impaired person to a narrower section where you could not fit standing next to each other, **first indicate this verbally, then slightly extend your arm behind your back.** The guided person will slide their hand from your elbow to your wrist so they can pull in behind you.

- It is important that, in this case, **you do not push the visually impaired person in front of you but lead them.**

## Through the door

If you two have arrived at a closed door, see which way the door opens. Is the handle on the left or right side of the door?

- If you approach the door so that **the doorknob and the visually impaired person are on the same side**, you can easily overcome the obstacle. For example, the door handle is on the right, but the person you guide is holding your left arm. In such a situation, when opening the door (for both inward and outward opening doors), you must reach across in front of the person being guided, and when passing through, you must go back to close the door.
- However, if you stop in front of the door and step over to the left side of the visually impaired person, i.e. they are holding your right arm, you can open the door with your left hand, which your guided person can close behind you after passing through.

## Stairs, thresholds, ramps

If you reach the bottom or the top of the stairs, **indicate this by stopping**. Tell them whether you are standing on the stairs leading **up or down**, and if possible, **tell them how many steps there are**.

- If it is a longer flight of stairs, **stop briefly or verbally signal that it is over**.
- If there is a handrail, offer it to the visually impaired person.
- **Escalators** are an exceptional case, although this is also a matter of personal preference. In the case of escalators, **the safer solution is for the sighted guide to send the visually impaired person forward**. In other words, you step behind the person being helped and place the visually impaired person's free hand on the escalator's handrail, ensure that the person being helped has stepped up the stairs safely, and only then step up yourself. However you

can also get on the escalator at the same time, but in this case, as a sighted guide, you must pay attention to whether you two standing next to each other do not obstruct fellow passengers who may be hurrying up or down.

- Also indicate thresholds, ramps or other floor elements by slowing down or stopping and verbally.

## Guiding a visually impaired person with a guide dog

There may be a situation in which a visually impaired person with a service dog asks for your help. **In all cases, the dogs are trained to lead on the left side of their owner** (an exceptional situation may be some weakness, paralysis or absence of the left arm or hand).

- It is important to **approach a guide dog and its owner from the owner's „dogless” side**, so in general, approach and lead from the right side. The visually impaired owner lets go of the dog's harness handle when they „switch” to sighted guidance, but at the same time, they still hold the leash in their left hand, and the dog continues on their left side even though they are not guiding.
- Hopefully, this is unnecessary to describe, but when the guide dog is in a harness, i.e. working, don't distract them with sounds, petting, or food. They work even when they are apparently just lying in a harness on public transport vehicles, in a shop, etc. It is a serious task to lie calmly and disciplined while various stimuli swirl around them, so do not disturb them.
- Also, if you really want to contact the furry four-legged friend, always ask the visually impaired owner first and respect their answer. They know their dog best; they know

how much the dog's work falls apart and how much the dog gets excited when strangers start messing around with them.

## Finding a seat

When escorting a visually impaired person to a chair or bench, **place their hand on the back of the seat**. From this point on, the assisted person can feel their hand on the back of the chair or on the armrest to see where they can sit.

- The method of stopping the visually impaired person in front of the chair, then turning them so their back faces the seat and ordering them to sit down is not necessarily a confidence-inspiring method. This solution usually pops up in the sighted guide's mind when no backrest is available.
- In the absence of a backrest, it is also a better solution than the previous one; if you stand the blind or partially sighted person opposite the bench, show them the seat with your hand guiding their hand and let them take a seat..

## Orientation indoors

Of course, the techniques described above can be used indoors as well as outdoors. For example, suppose you invite your visually impaired friend over to your new apartment. In that case, you can use the directions to describe the relative position of the individual rooms and the location of the furnishings. Or, if this is necessary, in the store, for example, you can show the visually impaired customer the conveyor belt of the cash using the hands-on technique described in connection with showing a seat, so they will know precisely where to pack the products they want to buy.

- However, **it is essential to consider which of the methods above is more appropriate in the given situation**. You may have so much stuff on your kitchen counter in your

new apartment that it's easier to put your friend's hand on the brand-new coffee machine you want to show off instead of directions.

- However, there may also be situations **where it is not exactly hygienic for a visually impaired person to touch something**. For example, in a restaurant's bathroom, try to help only with directions because you would not like to feel along the walls or the toilet seat either.

## A visually impaired person with a companion

It is a common experience that when the visually impaired person has a companion, sighted people automatically start communicating with the companion, and in the worst case, they start talking about the visually impaired person to the sighted companion in the third person. For example, in a furniture store, a visually impaired customer inquires from the salesperson about the different types of office chairs. The salesperson talks over their head and asks the sighted companion, „Do you think it's good if I explain this to the lady this way?“.

- Establishing a relationship with another sighted person is more familiar and ordinary. Still, you can put the visually impaired person in a subordinate status. Even if this is not your intention, you treat them as a dependent, indecisive person.
- **When the visually impaired person is the one asking, answer them.** Treat them as equals because it is true that in a different way, with different means, but they have their place in life the same way as you and other sighted people.

# LIFE BEYOND SIGHT

After reading the previous section, you may already have an idea of how it is possible to thrive as a visually impaired person in a world as focused on vision as ours. So you are already well ahead of most sighted people, who cannot imagine, „How can you live like this?!“. Many people state categorically that they would undoubtedly be unable to continue living if they lost sight. This „ignorance“ gives rise to the two extreme reactions that are often directed towards the visually impaired (or other disabled persons): pity and heroism.

Being visually impaired deserves neither pity nor deification. It is challenging for a visually impaired person to live in a world where vision plays such an important role. However, if differently, with other means - in some cases perhaps in a slower and/or more complex way - a visually impaired person can live a life as whole as a sighted person. In the ideal case, this is not done by the visually impaired person by adapting to the vision-oriented environment but rather by designing the environment so that the visually impaired person does not feel hindered. That is, **an inadequate environment can be disabling for a visually impaired person rather than the visually impaired person being disabled.**

Organised into four units below, you can read briefly about **how different areas of life can be made accessible for visually impaired people.**

# ACQUIRING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

When you want to get some information, you can, for example, look it up on the Internet, check the timetable at the bus stop or read a book. Regarding the use of words, as I wrote above, there is no difference between a sighted person and a visually impaired person. The difference lies in the fact that visually impaired people can do all this with their fingers and ears, or some of the visually impaired and partially sighted people can even use their eyes.

## Braille writing

It was no accident that I mentioned fingers first. Braille writing is the most vivid in the public mind regarding acquiring information for blind and partially sighted people. In everyday life, you can often come across this mysterious writing system on medicine boxes.

- In this system, **every letter and punctuation mark has its equivalent**. The easiest way to explain it is if you imagine a 6-place egg tray with three rows in two columns. The eggs placed in the holder symbolise the tactile dots themselves. You get different letters depending on which compartment of the egg holder you place an egg in (it can be just one piece). The simplest example is the letter ,a': its equivalent is the egg placed in the upper left compartment, i.e. the dot in the upper left corner. A word is made up by stacking the ,egg holders' next to each other, just like the letters in this text.

**Not all visually impaired people learn and read Braille.** To use Braille for fast and enjoyable reading requires many years of practice. That is why it is most often acquired by visually impaired people who attend special schools and/or are born

blind. This is logical because a person who became blind in adulthood does not necessarily start this lengthy study (although this is also possible within the framework of elementary rehabilitation) since there are much more modern and faster ways of obtaining information.

However, the question arises: **Given this, is it enough to make museums and other public institutions accessible by displaying Braille signs?**

## Electronic devices

Similar to how electronic books and the Internet are increasingly taking over the role of printed books and the press, Braille is increasingly being pushed out of its long-leading position by the development of technology. **Instead of touch, the focus now shifts to hearing.** Whether this trend is beneficial or harmful is also a matter of debate among visually impaired people.

It is certain that with the development of technology, with the help of so-called **screen readers and magnifier programs**, an immeasurably broader and larger amount of information has become available to blind and partially sighted people. Thanks to these programs, even a visually impaired person can manage computers, smartphones and tablets.

There are several types of screen reader programs. There are programs for PCs in purchasable and free downloadable versions, while the VoiceOver utility is built into all IOS products by default. Screen readers can be operated using the keyboard instead of a mouse. Using them requires learning, as they can be navigated with a combination of keys, i.e. keyboard commands. Ultimately, the program says or reads out what the focus is set on due to pressing the keyboard command.

- For example, if you want to open a folder on the Desktop. You turn on the computer; the screenreader program will automatically load itself (if it is set that way). To move the cursor to the Desktop, press Windows + M. The program announces that you are on the Desktop; from here, you can

use the arrow keys to move from icon to icon. However, it is faster if you type the initial letter of the folder and the focus is transferred to the requested folder, which you can open with an Enter.

It was essential to describe this process because many people misunderstand screen reader programs. It is believed that blind people control the computer with voice commands, while the reverse is true. **It is not the visually impaired user who speaks, but the program that announces what is in its focus.** If you are lucky, the Internet can also be used according to the same principles. **Screen readers have limitations and cannot read everything that appears on the screen,** mainly in the case of websites.

- It may happen, for example, that the program says: Button. However, it no longer tells you what happens when you press the button. You don't know what the label of the button is because the creator of the web page ignored labelling it.

**A website is barrier-free if a visually impaired user can use it in the same way and the same detail with the help of a screen reader program as a sighted user using their vision.**

The concept is the same for touch-screen devices, smartphones, and tablets. But while on the computer, the keyboard serves as a cursor, here, you can interact with the interface with your fingers and gestures instead of keyboard commands.

- The screen reader says what you put your finger on. The simplest example of a gesture is double-tapping, which activates the given element you previously placed your finger on.

In addition to screen reader programs, there are various **magnifying programs** for computers and phones. **These can help partially sighted people.** To read paper-based documents, they can use a hand magnifier in addition to their glasses, and some visually impaired people can even use an electronic magnifier.

Returning to audio-based information acquisition, for example, a **dictaphone** (or smartphone voice note-taking application) can

be very helpful to a visually impaired student. With it, they can record the audio of a lesson and learn from it by listening back.

- **Audiobooks** are also useful. Of course, you can read out a compulsory 500-page book with the help of the screen reader, but in many cases, it is much more enjoyable to read a book interpreted by a human speaker than listening to the screenreader's poor intonation and monotonous machine voice.

Based on the above, the fact that visually impaired people can use computers, smartphones, etc., **it is not so unexpected that visually impaired people use the same communication channels as you.** It would help if you did not get stuck on the idea that they exchange long letters written in Braille or only talk on the phone. Exchanging text messages, e-mailing, chatting, and using social networking sites are also commonplace among visually impaired people.

## ORIENTATION AND GETTING AROUND

Orientation skills are essential for a safe and independent life. With the loss of vision, **hearing, touch, and, in some cases, even smell, become crucial.**

- For example, **hearing** can help you assess how far an intersection is from you. In addition to the sound of the vehicles moving parallel to you, you can hear the noise of cross traffic perpendicular to you as you approach the intersection. Sounds also play a considerable role when crossing a road: in the best case, it is because there is a talking or beeping traffic light, or if there is none, then because you can cross when parallel car traffic starts.
- Paying attention to the sounds can also help determine

whether a space is narrowing or widening.

You can make the most of **touch** while walking with your soles.

- You can use it to count, for example, sloped driveways and curbs. Tactile guide strips built into the ground can lead you to a pedestrian crossing or indicate an entrance door, elevator, or stairs.

Sometimes, the **sense of smell** can also provide clues for orientation.

- For example, you can note that after the bakery, where the smell of various pastries wafts into the street, you must pay attention because you have to turn left to reach your workplace.

The things mentioned above can also help sighted people. Still, since they are primarily looking, they may not notice these non-visual cues.

The fundamental difference between sighted and visually impaired getting around lies in the fact that, in the case of the latter, you **may need some kind of aid to walk independently**. The conditional mode is primarily relevant for partially sighted people, as they may have a degree of vision left to walk safely without any aid.

The wording of the aid is no accident either: **we can talk about a tool, the white cane, or a helper, the guide dog.**

## White cane

Regarding function, there are two types of canes: **the signal cane and the actual white cane.**

- **The signal cane** is also a white-coloured cane, but it is shorter, so it is unsuitable for scanning the ground. As the name suggests, its purpose is to **let the user make it known to the outside world that they are visually impaired**. It may be necessary if a visually impaired person is walking

with a sighted companion or if they have enough vision to be able to walk alone; however, sighted passers-by know when they see the signal cane that they have to pay attention, for example, they are the ones who have to get out of the way of the person with the cane and not the other way around.

- There are many types of the **actual white cane**: telescopic, foldable, or just rigid, made of aluminum, with a hook, with a wooden handle, American or Czech models, etc. These canes are longer than the above-mentioned signal canes, reaching from the ground to the center of the user's chest when placed in a vertical position. Their ends are replaceable, and here, too, you can choose from several options. Interchangeability is necessary due to wear and tear.
- We distinguish between two types of cane use techniques: **the constant contact and the touch technique**. Constant contact can best be described as a sweeping motion left and right, while the Touch technique refers to tapping at the two endpoints (left and right). By constant contact, you can find, for example, a curb more safely, but by using the touch technique, you can move faster.

## Guide dogs

Looking only at the technical part, **the speed is the most significant difference between a white cane and a guide dog walk**.

- From a social, mental, or even material point of view, there are huge differences between walking with a white cane and a guide dog. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Thus, personal preference also plays a significant role in whether a visually impaired person walks with a white cane or a guide dog.

**Getting around with a guide dog is much faster than walking with a white cane.** Among other things, new guide dog owners

have to get used to this after the slower pace of the white cane.

- The two main activities guide dogs perform during work are **avoiding obstacles and signalling objects**. Obstacles can be static: a car parked on the sidewalk, a pillar, etc. or moving passers-by. The dog indicates going up and down stairs. He can be taught to find and distinguish the doors, elevator, seat, stop, trash can, etc.

I've written before, but you can never say this enough: a guide dog works when it's wearing a harness with the logo of its training organisation. It is vitally crucial that you **NEVER distract an assistance dog with petting, food, or making sounds meant to please without the owner's permission!** During his work as a guide, they are the eyes of their owners, and distraction can even lead to accidents. But **don't bother them when they are doing a passive task, waiting**. A lot of work goes into these four-legged friends being able to behave in such a disciplined manner; respect that.

A frequently asked question about guide dogs is where they can enter.

- Practically everywhere the general public is allowed to enter. Furthermore, they can do all this without wearing a muzzle ( this part is applicable in Hungary; see Minister of Social Affairs 27/2009. (XII. 3.) SZMM decree on the rules for the training, testing, and use of assistance dogs).

## EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

Shopping, administration, housework, and cooking are all ordinary activities. And if not in an „ordinary” way for a sighted person, **all of these can be solved even with visual impairment**.

- Several so-called **talking devices** are available to visually impaired people, including talking weight and kitchen scales, blood pressure, fever and blood sugar level monitors, and wristwatches.

- Withdrawing money is not an obstacle for the blind, either. Certain ATMs have a program similar to the screen readers used on computers. All a visually impaired person has to do is plug their earphones into the machine, then follow the program's instructions and press specific number keys to withdraw money or check the balance.

In addition to special talking devices, **smartphone applications** are also a huge help. These applications are usually accessed using the phone's camera.

- An example is the money recogniser, which makes it easier to navigate between paper banknotes. You have to hold the money in front of your phone's camera, and the app will recognise it and announce the result. There are colour recognition and text recognition applications. Moreover, there are also applications through which a visually impaired person can receive real-time help from a sighted assistant in something that needs to be seen through a video call.
- **Artificial intelligence** is increasingly gaining ground and offers new opportunities for a more barrier-free life. For example, it is common for a visually impaired user to find a post or message on social networking sites or even in personal messages that contain only one picture without any textual description or explanation. Until now, visually impaired users did not know what to do with the images. If they considered it important to understand what was visible in the pictures, they had to ask a sighted person. Artificial intelligence, for example, can already help with this, providing impressively detailed image descriptions. Thus, the contents of funny memes or cute family photos missed so far are no longer a secret to visually impaired users.

Of course, there are 'tricks' that make life easier for the visually impaired **without special equipment**.

- A good example is the tactile identification of coins based on their size and sidewall markings.

- But relying only on touch, it is easy to sew up a torn button, cut nails, apply makeup, etc., of course, with enough practice.
- Baking and cooking are not insurmountable obstacles either. Instead of sight, more attention should be paid to smells, tastes, and textures.

## LEISURE ACTIVITIES

In addition to studying, work, and everyday activities, **entertainment and sports** are just as much a part of the life of a visually impaired person as they are of a sighted person. Whether it's reading an exciting book on a winter's evening, going on a long hike in the mountains, or watching a Shakespearean tragedy in the theater, nothing is impossible.

- The **book** can be read aloud, your guide dog and your friends can accompany you on the trip, and theatre plays can be enjoyed with the help of audio description.
- There are **sports** specially developed for visually impaired people, such as goalball, blind football, or blind table tennis. However, running, swimming, tandem cycling, or some kind of martial art can also be practiced with a sighted companion.
- Although not in large quantities, you can also find films and series with audio description among **TV shows**. Even if slowly, watching TV is becoming increasingly barrier-free. As of September 2020, the law requires the accessibility of domestically produced films for visually impaired viewers on the channels with the highest number of viewers between 18:30 and 21:30 (applicable for Hungary).

- In addition to theatre and TV, you can also find the „**audio description**” option in various streaming providers’ soundtrack and subtitle menus. 99% of them are in English, although occasionally, there are Hungarian narrations of lower quality, presumably generated by artificial intelligence.

## Summary

You reached the end of this guide. I hope I was able to support my argument expressed in the little introductory section: visually impaired is just an adjective, like blonde, nice or intelligent. It is a part of a person but not the sole determinant. The group of visually impaired people is not homogeneous but consists of diverse, colourful and different individuals, just like the sighted people. And these two groups easily dissolve if we group people based on another characteristic, such as whether they are dog or cat persons, play an instrument or not, or prefer gummy bears or chocolate.



