



Introducing Health Sciences: Visual Impairment

Training techniques

Man

One of the best techniques when you first lose your sight is to learn long cane training. Long cane was developed in America a number of years ago and it's a cane that's at least one step ahead of whatever you're doing so when it's held against you vertically it comes up to your chest, middle of your chest, roughly speaking, and when you're walking with it you have it roughly around the middle of your tummy, round near your belly button, and you sweep it from side to side as you walk along and it detects any obstacles in advance of your bodyline coming into contact with that obstacle, so if it's a flight of steps going up or down, or if it's the kerb edge, or another pavement obstacle, then it detects it nice and early.

One of the things about long cane training is that it does bring you back your independence but of course you also have to have the ability to concentrate quite carefully on what's going on around you. Now walking down a rural street in the suburbs, where you might live, is one thing but to go into central London which is what I started to do as I went back to work is in the Underground, coming up out of the Underground, and round to my office was a very different experience. Apart from anything else you have an awful lot of noise in a city area so some of your noise clues are difficult to pick up. You've got to be able to find particular crossing points, hear the signals, be brave about launching yourself into the road, so I used to get to the office and feel quite tired to begin with, but that does lessen over time. But one of the things I did after about eighteen months of doing this, I did decide that if I was to continue to work, which I very much wanted to do, and I knew most of my work opportunities would be in London, I decided to go for guide dog training.

Over the last twenty-five years I have had four dogs in total. On average they work an eight year period and I've never forgotten the excitement of that first walk with my first dog, although the trainer who was training me at the time, and they normally do this, choose a very safe place for your first walk 'cos the dog doesn't really know you in that first instance, that sense of freedom, the fluidity of movement, and I had been more or less sighted you know for most of my childhood and early adult life, it just felt like going back to those days when I could walk freely 'cos the thing the dog does for you is it takes all that concentration about obstacles out the way 'cos you've still got to instruct the dog but it will get you round the obstacles, and it therefore speeds up the, it both speeds up the forward motion of your travel but it also relaxes you into a different way of mobility.