

VISUAL-SPATIAL INTERVENTIONS

Suggestions for Helping Someone with Impairment in Visuospatial Functioning

Shelly Weaverdyck

TO KEEP IN MIND

1. A person with visuospatial impairment may have difficulty **noticing objects** in all parts of their visual field, accurately seeing **how far away** an object is from their own body, seeing **where objects are** relative to other objects, or knowing **where all of their own body parts** are.
2. These difficulties in knowing where objects are may be subtle, so that even when a person can see the location of an object, they may be **working very hard** to do so.
3. A person usually does not know they are having these difficulties, so asking them questions about how well they see may not be helpful. Try to make seeing or a task as **easy** as possible for them.
4. This difficulty in seeing where objects and people are is most likely due to changes in this person's eyes or their brain's ability to recognize what they see. It is rarely due to this person's desire or intention. The comment "She sees what she wants to see." or "He sees when he wants to see." is usually false and a misinterpretation of a person's abilities or desires. Be **compassionate, patient, and tolerant**.
5. A person's ability to see where objects and people are may **fluctuate** or be **unpredictable** at any given moment. If you return another time, they may be able to see the location of objects or people more easily.
6. **Watch** this person closely to discern how well they see where objects, you, or other people are at this moment in time. We aren't used to noticing visuospatial difficulties so we often miss them.
7. Adjust your **communication**, the **environment**, and the **task to help** them see where objects and people are more easily or to **compensate** for their reduced ability.

SUMMARY OF VISUOSPATIAL INTERVENTIONS

8. Remember this person may not see objects in the same place you see them. Try to **see from this person's perspective**.
9. **Economy of movement**: Move minimally, gesture minimally, and organize a task so most of your movements are out of this person's sight.
10. Watch for this person's **reaction** to see if they are accurately seeing where objects and your body are. Watch for confusion or anxiety due to misinterpretation of objects or your movements.
11. **Modify your movements** in response to their reactions.
12. Approach this person from the **front** and at **eye level**, unless one side is weaker than the other side. Then approach on the stronger side.
13. Slow down. **Move slowly** when approaching and when reaching toward this person.
14. **Reduce clutter** and unnecessary objects in the space around this person.
15. Have only **one person** in this person's sight when helping with a task. Try to have only one person assisting them at a time.
16. Use **contrast** to make objects stand out in the environment and from each other.
17. Accommodate this person's **fatigue**. They may get tired just sitting in the environment.

COMMUNICATION

18. Try to **see from this person's perspective**. Imagine how they might be seeing a space or object.
19. Discern where to hold an object for this person to see it most easily, quickly, and accurately. Often this is directly **in front** of their eyes.
20. Present all objects to this person in the **spot where they see best**. Avoid holding the object too far away, too close, too high, too low, too far to the left or right. For example, avoid holding a glass of water too close to her/his chest, so that when she/he looks down she/he doesn't notice it.
21. **Approach** this person in this spot where they **see best**. Avoid positioning your body, particularly face, hands, and arms too far away, too close, too high, too low, too far to the left or right.
22. Allow enough **time** for this person to **shift attention** to you and to an object and to focus on you or the object.
23. When you or an object moves, **watch this person's eyes** and **move slowly** enough to ensure her/his eyes are following you or the object and that this person is comfortable.
24. When **moving a body part**, such as your arm to touch this person, move it **slowly** to reduce the chances the movement will be misinterpreted. For example, an arm movement toward them may be seen as aggressive because it looks like it is moving toward them more quickly than it really is, and is misinterpreted as an intention to hit them. When handing them an object, they might assume you are handing it to someone else nearby if they don't locate it in space accurately. When helping them eat, move the spoon slowly to their mouth to avoid their head backing up. Make it easier for this person to recognize the speed with which an object is approaching.
25. Avoid moving yourself and your body parts or an object any more often than is necessary.
26. Move yourself, your body parts, or an object as **short a distance** as possible. Avoid making the person move her/his head to follow you or the object.
27. When gesturing, use **small gestures** and use gestures only when necessary. For example, in order to reduce this person's fatigue, avoid requiring her/him to follow the movement of your arm or hand. Try to make any gesture just large enough to capture this person's attention and to be easily seen.
28. Move this person's **hand to the object** to help them locate it. For example, move their hand to their dinner plate to more easily locate it.
29. **Hand** the object to this person directly, rather than expecting them to locate it on their own.
30. **Point to or touch** an object intended for this person.
31. Remember this person may fall, bump into something, or not respond to a request because they don't recognize where their body is in space. For example, if they don't respond when asked to lift their arm while dressing, try to discern if they know where their arm is.
32. When this person misinterprets an object or the environment, **explain and reassure** them. For example, if a shiny floor looks wet, tell them it isn't wet even though it looks wet. If they begin to try to step up or over a line on the carpet, tell them it is just the carpet and not a step. If an object like a laundry cart looks frightening, explain what it is.
33. Have only **one person** helping this person at a time. If more than one person is necessary, then have only one person in this person's sight. The other person(s) should quietly stay in the background.

ENVIRONMENT

34. Make sure there is enough **light** to easily see you and any object.
35. **Reduce excess clutter** in the environment.
36. Make sure the area surrounding you and any object **contrasts** with you and the object so you and the object are more easily seen. For example, make sure the pill is lighter or darker than the spoon which holds it, or the washcloth is lighter or darker than the shower or sink behind it. Make sure your clothing stands out from the visual area behind it. For example avoid wearing a long white sleeve when gesturing where to put her/his hand on a white sheet.
37. Make sure the area surrounding you or the object is not confusing or patterned, causing you or the object to be camouflaged or lost in the background. For example, avoid wearing a highly patterned blouse that might be hard to distinguish from the busy environment behind you.
38. Make an object that is important to this person **stand out** from other objects. Make the important object colorful, or increase the light-dark contrast between the important object and other objects. For example place a colorful place mat under a plain plate to draw this person's attention to the plate and to help her/him see exactly where it is.
39. **Group similar objects together** so they are easier to find and identify.
40. Avoid changing the **familiar location** of objects, so this person can rely on habit to find objects.
41. Reduce the amount of furniture in the environment to reduce chances of this person bumping into things while walking.
42. **Modify furniture** in the environment to reduce risk of injury if they bump into it when walking. For example round the corners of tables.
43. **Contrast** grab bars, the edge of steps, and of thresholds to the shower with the wall or area to ensure they accurately see the location of the grab bars or edges and how high or deep they are.
44. Position **multiple three dimensional landmarks** down a hallway so this person has a better sense of how long the hallway is, or how far it is to a particular door or room.
45. Reduce unnecessary distinctions in the environment. For example, paint the wall all one color, instead of painting part of the wall and wall papering the other part. Reduce the need for this person to figure out that the wall is one wall and not two different surfaces.

TASK

46. When helping this person with a task, **organize** the task so that most of your movements are out of this person's sight.
47. Organize a task so that objects that are not necessary for this person to use are **out of their sight**.
48. During tasks that require much visual processing, allow time to **rest** before, during, and after the task. Respond gently to the irritability that might accompany the fatigue such tasks often cause.
49. Place objects **close** enough to this person to reduce the need to calculate long distances. For example, place the glass of water to the side of the plate, rather than beyond it, to reduce the chances they will put their glass down on the edge of the plate, rather than just beyond it.
50. Reduce the number of objects near this person to reduce the need to calculate distances. For example, reduce the number of people talking to them, the number of items to pick up and use at the bathroom sink, and the number of glasses and cups to drink from during a meal.