

**The World at your Finger-Tips: Understanding
Blindness.**

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 13th, 2004

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ABSTRACT

The World at Your Fingertips: Understanding Blindness

Sandy Resendes

About 1.1 million Americans, and 40,000 Canadians are legally blind, ie: with a visual acuity of 20/200, or worse in the better eye; the visual field is 20 degrees or less. In sum, this means the legally blind person can see 20 feet (6 meters) what the average person can see at 200 feet (61 meters). While the medical literature has discussed the etiology of blindness, the social dimensions has been relatively ignored in sociology. People who are legally blind have rarely had the opportunity to tell their stories; to share their hardships and triumphs.

I conducted in depth-interviews with 6 men and 6 women living across Canada. The study is framed around Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and "spoiled identity" as well as the more recent Disability Studies that stresses "the normals" as being the 'identity spoilers' or the "problem." The participants revealed victimization from various sources including classmates, teachers, employers, colleagues, and the public in general. Focus is placed directly on the strategies that respondents have devised in coping with these adversities and that often accompany a highly visible disability. Eight principal methods and response to the discrimination against people with blindness can be distinguished. These strategies varied depending on the circumstances of the interaction and the informant's coping skills. These typologies are mutually exclusive and do overlap. They include: (1) The Isolates (2) The Rebels (3) The Self-Entertainers (4) The Talkers (5) The Experimenters, (6) The Positivists, (7) The Activists, (8) The Self-Acceptors. These eight type of responses and reactions to resistance to the stigmatization of blindness are essential elements of personal change, and even possibly social change. People with blindness have developed these coping mechanisms at various circumstances throughout their lives.

The sociological significance of the research is threefold: although there have been some personal narratives on blindness, such as Helen Keller, and Stephen Kuusisto, and some survey research on blindness, this is I think the first in depth qualitative and comparative analysis of blindness. Second, this is also the first study to explore not only the conventional aspects of prejudice and discrimination, but also resistance to these, and the technical and social coping mechanisms of the blind. Third, while Goffman really opened up the field of stigmatization studies both in 1963, and the *Presentation of Self* in 1959, his focus was primarily on the individual as having or being a social problem. Despite his sympathy for the individual, I have followed the new Disability Studies pioneered by UPIAS (1976), Oliver (1980), and Abberly (1987) which defines the majority of society as the root of the problem.

Finally, despite sympathy that the non blind may have for the blind, most of my respondents rejected it, whether it came from families or lovers. Help might be useful, and fairness at work and school, but not sympathy. And many discussed not only how much they had learned from their blindness, but also how much 'stronger' or 'better' they were as individuals from their experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my deep appreciation to the many people who contributed generously to this project. I would like to begin by thanking God for guiding me throughout this entire journey. I also would like to express my foremost gratitude to my thesis committee. A special thanks goes to my supervisor, Dr. Anthony Synnott, who reviewed this thesis with very great care, and offered constructive suggestions providing me with guidance every step of the way. His support, encouragement and accessibility have made this experience an enriching one. My appreciation is also extended to Professor Angela Ford-Rosenthal. I am constantly enriched by the teachings extended to me in her learning. I also thank Dr. Anouk Belanger for her insightful comments and inputs.

I am deeply grateful to all my respondents for sharing their personal life stories. Without listening to their voices there would be no way of understanding their world. Their support became a guidance and a motivating force in helping me believe in this project. Their encouragement has enlightened me with the possibilities connected with this venture. I cannot thank them enough.

My heartfelt appreciation and love goes out to my parents and family. My mother and father have become my source of mentors and endless support. To Sergio, whose love and encouragement has helped me throughout this entire journey. Mom, Dad, and Sergio, your belief in me, and in the importance of this project has made this experience an unforgettable one. I have been blessed with your patience and wisdom which have inspired me to stay connected to my belief in this project. I dedicate this thesis to you.

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INTRODUCTION

The unique recognition of blindness is no longer a recent phenomenon. It is most common for people to group the blind in one category. They know little about the condition beyond the appearance of the person they witness on the street corner. In turn, blind persons, although they differ markedly in their own commitment to the special world of the blind, they have evolved sets of patterned responses to the conditions and orientations that surround blindness. As in most groups, there is a great deal of variability in the responses of blind men and women. Blindness has become more than just a physical condition. It is for this reason that a sociological understanding of blindness addresses key issues amenable for comprehending all other landscapes that the blind may endure during their lifetime.

Research Problem

The origins of stigma placed on the blind are largely connected to the mores and values found in our social structures throughout history. Beliefs carried over in to our progressive society can conflict with individual interests who strive to lead successful lives and are continually faced with challenges and daily adversities. At the turn of this new century we see more blind persons accomplishing successfully, but undoubtedly facing continual hardships along the way. The principal questions leads insight to the way in which the blind may come to a productive resolution of responding to this stigmatization, and the implications associated with such stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination.

The principal questions I have researched explore several different avenues, such as the following. *One of the questions I have researched are some of the coping strategies*

that the blind have developed over time in order to deal with stigma and other daily adversities? My research manifests the various ways in which the legally blind cope with the daily distress of blindness, among the many challenges they endure frequently. In this case, daily adversities refers to the daily misfortunes and hazards that they may experience on a continual basis. For instance, being physically victimized at school or work can become a continual daily challenge for many. The question that I wish to explore are the coping mechanisms that they have developed overtime in order to deal with these afflictions. A second question considers how they have coped to the physical and emotional adjustment of blindness. What significant factors are involved in helping them in the physical and emotional rehabilitation of blindness? These and other key issues will be addressed throughout the chapters.

With the exception of research done by Elliot et al. (1991), and N.D. Beggs (1992), few studies have actually dealt with the various coping strategies used by this population. The stigma of the blind, and their various coping strategies have been largely ignored in the sociological domain.

Coping skills are diverse rather than monolithic, and are used as defense mechanisms in either a positive or negative manner (Tuttle, 1984). Even the researchers above have suggested that various coping strategies have yet not been thoroughly researched. For instance, certain studies have repeatedly reported that social support and family resources become significant tools for coping with multiple daily adversities. Physical assistance, the sharing of resources and information, and the emotional and psychological support that is transmitted through interpersonal contact can become

particularly favorable during the coping process (Elliott et al., 1991: 157). However, there are those who easily turn away and isolate themselves in order to avoid distressful or unpleasant situations. Others who are stigmatized may learn to hold the same negative beliefs about self-identity and self-ability that members of the general public hold of them. While some cope with negative challenges by sharing sympathy with others who have their own stigma. These coping mechanisms among many others have not been thoroughly investigated. The idea that they set out to learn new skills in order to meet up against daily challenges has also not been explored in depth in past academic studies. The literature on Disability Studies helps clarify the issue of how society becomes the disabled counterpart limiting the blind's potential access to internal and external venues in the public frontier.

The organization of the thesis is as follows: In chapter one I consider the prevalence and etiology of blindness in Canada. Chapter two considers the theoretical approaches that can be used to help explain the actions my sample members have taken in response to their daily experiences and hardships. It is worth speculating on how Goffman, and Disability Studies will be reviewed to analyze their daily experiences and hardships. The methodology of data collection, and interviewing a sample of blind individuals is presented in chapter four. Chapter five, six, seven and eight present the data. In specific, chapter five discusses family dynamics, along with childhood and adolescent victimization. Chapter six explores the significance of intimate relationships throughout different stages of their life. In chapter seven, the respondents address their experience with employment discrimination and public maltreatment. And lastly, chapter eight examines the coping mechanisms the participants have developed over time to deal with the continual daily

hardships they've had to endure over the course of being blind.

The quotes in the last four chapters present the findings that preclude to certain themes and assumptions. They are descriptive detailed and sometimes lengthy. This becomes important as it permits all participants to furnish detailed accounts about their lives. I have chosen qualitative research as my method basis in order to convey the research findings, as it offers my respondents the opportunity to voice their experiences. This in turn, establishes the link for researchers to begin first by listening to their respondents in order to attempt to comprehend their background and experiences. This research attempts to understand blindness by revealing another kind of research that allows people to share their own story. We begin by listening, in order to develop the necessary skills for analyzing and interpreting.

CHAPTER 1

BLINDNESS

In 1997, The World Health Organization Programme for the Prevention of Blindness and Deafness based on 1995 population estimates, that approximately 45 million persons are blind and another 135 million have low vision world wide. In 1991 Statistics Canada estimated 3, 316, 870 persons in Canada living with disabilities. And of these, 581,110 which accounted for 18%, reported a visual impairment.

A study known as the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS), undertaken by Statistics Canada in 2001 identified 610, 950 Canadians as having a 'seeing' disability. Pals study defined an individual as having a seeing disability if he or she:

- Has a difficulty seeing ordinary newspaper, when corrective lenses is usually worn.
- Has difficulty seeing the face of someone four meters, or twelve feet, across a room, with corrective lenses if usually worn.

Unfortunately, the study did not focus particularly on the various visual disabilities. For instance, it did not specifically highlight statistics on the percentage of legally blind persons in Canada. Therefore, the 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS) will be used for my discussion on the statistical analysis since it clarifies different categories of visual impairment and blindness.

The following chapter will review the definitions of visual acuity, the major leading causes of legal blindness, and the latest Canadian statistics on blindness. An international comparison of legal blindness will also be addressed.

Defining legal blindness

The Canadian National Institute for The Blind (CNIB, June 1999), uses two criteria for defining legal blindness. The CNIB have defined a 'legally blind' or a 'registered blind' person as: "best corrected visual acuity of 20/200, or worse in the better eye; visual field is 20 degrees or less" (June 1999: 8). This means, the legally blind person can see at 20 feet (6 meters) what the average person can see at 200 feet (61 meters).

An individual may also be considered legally blind if there is significant loss in the field of vision (ie: central or peripheral vision loss). People who are classified as having low vision are identified as having "best corrected visual acuity of less than 20/60 and better than 20/200 (CNIB, June 1999: 8). Two percent of people world wide are totally blind.

Visual acuity is the basis on which an individual's visual impairment is usually categorized. Tests of visual acuity indicate the resolving power of the eye: the ability to distinguish very fine detail. There are diverse ways of measuring visual acuity, but the most common method uses the Snellen Chart. This specific chart has rows of different size letters arranged in decreasing size, which can be read by a 'normal eye' at different distances. The largest has a viewing distance of 200 feet, with smaller letters for distances of 120, 80, 40, 30, 20, and 17 feet (Webster and Roe, 1998:23).

According to the instructions of the chart, a normal eye reads the letters at the 20 feet mark from a distance of 20 feet. Visual acuity for each eye is tested separately by asking the person to read the letters from a distance of 20 feet with one eye covered. The visual acuity for each eye is expressed as 20 over the smallest line of letters that can be

read. In North America, the 'normal' visual acuity is expressed as 20/20. For example, a visual acuity of 20/60 indicates that the smallest size of letters an individual can identify is 60 at a distance of 20 feet. Effectively, this means the individual can see at 20 feet what a person with an average eyesight can see at a distance of 60 feet. Someone falling into this category would be considered having the most profound low vision.

The following table describes the various degrees of visual impairment.

<u>Category of Vision</u>	<u>Degree of Impairment</u>	<u>Visual Acuity with Correction</u>
Normal	None	20/20
Normal	Slight	Less than 20/25
Low vision	Moderate	Less than 20/60
Low vision	Severe	Less than 20/160
Legal blindness	Profound	Less than 20/200

(Webster and Roe, 1998)

Etiology: Major Leading Causes of Legal Blindness

Major leading causes of legal blindness include macular degeneration, glaucoma, cataract, diabetic retinopathy, and retinal detachment (CNIB, 1999).

The following section includes a detailed description of these major eye diseases.

Diseases of the retina

Aging is an important variable in the analysis of legal blindness. In fact, HALS (1990) identifies aging as the second leading cause of vision loss. It accounted for 23.1% of all visual impairments. Aging refers to the diseases which primarily affect the eye. An example of such is *macular degeneration*. At the back of the eye there is a thin layer of

light-sensitive nerve cells and fibres called the retina. We see things because light entering the eye strikes the retina and is turned into an electric pulse that the brain understands as an image (CNIB, 1989:1). Near the centre of the retina is a small spot about the size of a pea called the macula. The macula processes the details in the central part of the image that the brain receives. The macula needs good light to work efficiently best in daylight. The rest of the retina is responsible for side, or peripheral vision. It is especially sensitive to dim light, which makes night vision possible. If the macula deteriorates for some reason, the retina becomes like a camera with a spot on the film. The center of the field of vision blurs, and all detail is lost. This condition is called macular degeneration.

Although the specific cause of the deterioration is not understood, age-related macular degeneration seems to be part of the normal aging process. As the eye gets older, the membrane separating the macula from the retinal blood vessels that supply it may break down. At the same time, new abnormal blood vessels form that may bleed and displace the macula. Cut off from its source of nourishment, the macula is permanently damaged. Although, the disease is usually associated with aging, it may be linked to other conditions such as infections, high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis and general diseases like diabetes mellitus. Children and adolescents may be affected by hereditary macular degeneration. Myopia, or nearsightedness, is a contributing factor, and excessive light and eye injuries leading to retinal detachment may also damage the macula (CNIB, 1989:2).

The course of condition may be slow, or rapid, but the deterioration generally occurs over a period of a few years. Peripheral vision will remain normal, but the person will have difficulty seeing at a distance, or doing detailed work. Faces may begin to blur,

and it becomes harder to distinguish colours. Distortion or wavy lines may accompany or precede the blurred vision.

Treatment begins with an eye examination to try to determine the cause of the condition. Unfortunately, because so little is known about the direct cause of macular degeneration, effective treatment is not possible in all cases (CNIB, 1989:3). Lasers are sometimes used to seal damaged blood vessels in the early stages of the wet type of macular degeneration. To determine whether laser treatment can help, a test called fluorescein angiography may be necessary. This test which involves injecting a dye into a vein and then photographing the circulation of the dye is ordered by an ophthalmologist (a medically trained eye doctor) and is usually performed in a hospital.

Although macular degeneration cannot be reversed, people with the condition can usually continue their daily activities using their peripheral vision and making the best use of their remaining detail vision. Devices such as high-intensity reading lamps and magnifiers help compensate for the loss of detail and make some fine work possible again. People with macular degeneration almost never go completely blind (CNIB, 1989: 4).

Glaucoma is a disease affecting 1 of every 100 Canadians over 40 years of age. It is one of the most common causes of blindness (CNIB, 1989:1). Although associated with increased age, glaucoma may develop at any age from infancy on. The basic cause of glaucoma is unknown, but a number of risk factors have been identified, they include age, heredity, myopia (shortsightedness), general diseases such as early heart attack and stroke, and raised intraocular pressure (IOP).

Raised IOP is found in most types of glaucoma and is the main target for control

of the disease. When there is a balance between fluid (aqueous) pumped into the eye and the amount that escapes from the eye, the IOP is normal. Raised IOP occurs when fluid outflow is obstructed. Visual loss in glaucoma is thought to be caused by raised IOP and other influences on the optic nerve located at the back of the eye. The gradual loss of nerve function causes loss of peripheral, or side vision painlessly and without notice.

There are many misconceptions about glaucoma. The following statements are all false:

- If I can see, I don't have glaucoma
- Glaucoma is caused by pressure or anxiety
- Using your eyes can make glaucoma worse

(CNIB, 1989:1)

Open-angle glaucoma

Open-angle glaucoma is the most common form of glaucoma. Patients rarely notice any symptoms until the disease is very advanced. It is truly a “silent blinding disease” (CNIB, 1989:2). Those affected can drive, read and perform most tasks because the visual loss usually is not a black cloud or a blurring of the vision. Because this loss is permanent and cannot be reversed by treatment, early detection and treatment are necessary to preserve remaining vision.

Tests for glaucoma are painless and take little time. The IOP is measured with a tonometer, and the optic nerve is viewed through the pupil with an ophthalmoscope. More elaborate tests may be required depending on the results. Treatment is begun with a prescribed medicated eye drop and sometimes, even pills, when the liquid solution is less likely to decrease the IOP. It may be necessary to change from one eye drop to another.

This lifelong disease must be constantly monitored to ensure the best treatment. All the medications are short acting, and a strict schedule is outlined by the physician in charge of treating the patient (CNIB, 1989: 2).

Good control may be limited by improper administration of medication by the patient because of poor understanding. If control is not achieved with medication, laser therapy may be required and performed during an outpatient visit. If this also fails to decrease the IOP surgery may be advised.

Closed-angle glaucoma

Closed-angle glaucoma is less frequent than open-angle glaucoma. It usually is manifested by the sudden onset of dull, aching pain over one eye associated with a change in vision-blurring and haloes (rainbows) around lights. This happens within half an hour and should not be ignored. This structure of the eye that can lead to this problem can often be seen beforehand by a health professional. In this case laser therapy may be advised to prevent the attack.

Cataracts are a very common cause of impaired vision. Over a million operations for cataracts were carried out in North America in 1987. Fortunately, there have been significant advances in the treatment of this condition in the past few years. And there is no doubt that there are continuous efforts in the process of being made to provide better solutions. People with this problem can now expect to regain most or all of their vision.

What is a cataract? A cataract is a clouding of the normally clear and transparent lens of the eye. It is not a tumor, or a new growth of skin or tissue over the eye but rather a fogging of the lens itself. When a cataract develops, the lens becomes as cloudy as a

frosted window. The lens is located near the front of the eye and focuses light on the retina at the back of the eye. Light passes through it to produce a sharp image on the retina. When a cataract forms, the lens may become so opaque and unclear that light cannot easily be transmitted to the retina. Often however, only a small part of the lens is affected, and if sight is not greatly impaired, there is no need to remove the cataract (CNIB, 1989:1).

There are many misconceptions about cataracts. For instance, they do not spread from one eye to another, although they may develop in both eyes at the same time. A cataract is not a film visible on the outside of the eye and is not caused by overuse of the eyes. Using the eye does not make a cataract worse. Cataracts usually develop gradually over many years; they rarely form over a few months. Finally, cataracts are not related to cancer, and having a cataract does not mean that a person will be permanently blind (CNIB, 1989: 2). Depending on the size and location of the cloudy areas in the lens, a person may or may not be aware that a cataract is developing. If the cataract is located on the outer edge of the lens, no change in vision may be noticed, but if it is located near the centre of the lens, it usually interferes with clear sight.

As cataracts develop, there may be hazy, fuzzy, and blurred vision. Double vision may also occur. The eyes may be more sensitive to light and glare, making night driving extremely difficult. There may be a need to change the eyeglass prescription frequently. As the cataract worsens, stronger glasses no longer improve sight. It may help to hold objects closer to the eye to read and do close-up work. The pupil, which is normally black, may undergo noticeable changes in colour and appear to be yellowish to white (CNIB,

1989: 4).

Surgery is the only effective way to remove the cloudy lens. Cataracts cannot be removed with a laser, an intense beam of light surgery can, however, be used after cataract surgery to open part of the lens membrane (the capsule), which may become cloudy after cataract surgery. Rapidly changing technology and research in recent years have not improved the treatment of cataracts with eyedrops, ointments, pills, special diets and eye exercises. These treatments have not been proven to dissolve or reduce a cataract. Fortunately, cataract surgery is highly successful and over 90% of the patients who undergo surgery regain useful vision. And fortunately, people with cataracts no longer need to become “nearly blind” before they can be treated, and sight can be restored.

Diabetes may affect as many as 1 million Canadians 50% of whom do not know they have it. It blinds 400 Canadians every year. Diabetes may affect many organs in the body, including blood vessels, nerves, the kidneys, the heart and the eyes. *Diabetic retinopathy* is an important cause of blindness. There are two main types of diabetic retinopathy. In proliferative retinopathy, new abnormal blood vessels grow on the surface of the retina, which may lead to hemorrhage and scarring of the retina. In non-proliferative, or background retinopathy small blood vessels within the retina leak fluid or tiny amounts of blood, which blurs the vision.

Poorly regulated and high levels of sugar in the blood can cause changes in the optics of the eye, resulting in blurred vision and changes in eyeglass prescriptions. The condition may also interfere with focusing of the eye. Control of the blood sugar level usually corrects these problems. Diabetes can cause cataracts, it can also cause double

vision when it affects the nerves that control the alignment and movement of the eyes. It can also cause the optic nerve to be more easily damaged by glaucoma. The most important cause of visual impairment in people with diabetes is *diabetic retinopathy*, a condition in which changes occur in the tiny blood vessels that nourish the retina (the light sensitive tissue that lines the back of the eye and changes the light into the nerve messages to be transmitted to the brain).

In the early stages of diabetic retinopathy, small blood vessels weaken and leak fluid or tiny amounts of blood distort the retina. At this stage the person may have normal vision or may note blurred or changing vision. Although 25% of people with diabetes have some degree of non-proliferative retinopathy, the condition does not progress to more severe problems in most.

In a more advanced stage, blood vessels in the retina are blocked or closed completely, and areas of the retina die. Proliferative diabetic retinopathy affects about 5% of people with diabetes and occurs when new abnormal blood vessels grow to replace the old ones. These new vessels are fragile and often rupture and bleed into the eye blocking vision. Scar tissue forms, shrinks and tears the retina, causing bleeding or detaching it from the back of the eye. As a result, this can cause severe visual loss or blindness. Fortunately, this occurs only in small minority of people with diabetes. The chances of having some form of diabetic retinopathy increase the longer a person has had diabetes. Retinopathy is present in 90% of those who have had the disease for more than 20 years.

Research has shown that severe visual loss from diabetic retinopathy can be prevented or delayed by laser treatment, but only if the retinopathy is diagnosed early

enough. This is why it is important for most people with diabetes, particularly, those who have had the disease for 5 years or more, to have an annual eye examination performed by a medical doctor trained to recognize the subtle early signs of the disease. Treatment with laser photocoagulation is aimed at sealing leaky vessels and preventing the growth of new abnormal vessels. Laser treatment has risks and side effects, which must be weighed against the benefits for each individual patient. In more advanced retinopathy the benefits usually outweigh the risks. However, despite treatment, or lack of it, some people with diabetes bleed massively into the eye and require a delicate microscopic operation called a vitrectomy to remove blood and scar tissue from the eye. Others also need surgery for retinal detachment. Research into diabetes and diabetic retinopathy is continuing and encourages the hope for prevention and better treatment (CNIB, 1989: 5).

Retinal detachment is the most serious problem that usually effects middle-aged or older people. It is more likely to develop in near-sighted people and those whose relatives have had retinal detachments. It may also be caused by a hard, or solid blow to the eye. Occasionally, it is hereditary. If not treated early, retinal detachment may lead to impairment or loss of vision.

The retina is a thin, light-sensitive tissue that covers the inside back portion of the eye. It works like the film in a camera. In most cases, retinal detachment is caused by the presence of one or more small tears or holes in the retina. These tears may be thinning of the retina with age, but more often they are caused by shrinkage of the vitreous, a clear, gel-like substance that fills the inside of the eye. The vitreous helps maintain the shape of the eye and allows light to pass through to the retina.

The vitreous is firmly attached to the retina in several places. As people get older, the vitreous shrinks and often separates from the retina. By the age of 50 years, the vitreous has separated from the retina in about 50% of all people. As the vitreous shrinks, it may pull a piece of the retina away with it, leaving a tear or hole in the retina. Abnormal growth of the eye (sometimes a result of nearsightedness), inflammation or injury may also cause the vitreous to shrink. In some cases, retinal detachment is caused by other diseases of the eye, such as tumors, severe inflammations, and complications of diabetes mellitus. In these cases there are not tears or holes in the retina, and treatment of the disease that causes the detachment is the only treatment that may correct the detachment.

In some cases the sudden appearance of spots or flashes of light may indicate substantial shrinkage of the vitreous with tears in the retina. In other cases, the person may notice a wavy or watery quality in their overall vision or the appearance of a dark shadow in some part of their peripheral vision. Further development of the retinal detachment will blur the central visions and create significant loss of vision unless the detachment is repaired. Occasionally, retinal detachment occurs suddenly, and the person will experience a total loss of vision in one eye. Similar rapid loss of vision may be caused by bleeding into the vitreous, which may happen when the retina is torn.

It is important to take note that if the retina is torn, prompt treatment may prevent retinal detachment from developing. If there is little or no retinal detachment, the tears are sometimes sealed with a laser light (laser photocoagulation). The laser places small burns around the edge of the tear. These produce scars that seal down the edges of the tear and prevent fluid from passing through. Retinal detachment can be repaired in over 90% of the

cases (CNIB, 1989:5).

The term 'laser' is an acronym that stands for Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission for Radiation. In the lasers most commonly used for eye surgery a powerful electric current is passed through a tube containing gas. This current produces energy, and the laser emits a narrow, uniform beam of light. The effect varies according to the type of laser used and the type of eye disorder (Canadian Ophthalmological, 1991:1).

Canadian Statistics: The Visually Impaired and Legally Blind Distribution in Canada

Statistics on vision impairment are available from a number of sources and agencies, depending upon the information needed. The purpose for the development of this document was to pull together commonly requested statistics so the reader can easily find answers to many frequently asked questions about visual impairment.

In obtaining the statistics, the most recent and clearly defined statistics were used whenever possible. Readers should note that estimates may vary depending upon the definitions used. Therefore, while the following attempts to use consistent statistics regarding definitions and populations to which the estimates apply, this is not always possible.

In 1991, statistics Canada published the most recent statistics accounted for the blind and visually impaired in Canada. The research was collected from The Health and Activity Limitation Survey (Hals). In 1986, Hals estimated 3, 316, 870 persons in Canada with disabilities. And of these, 581, 110 people (18 % of the total) reported a visual impairment.

The target population of HALS consisted of all persons with a physical or

psychological disability who were living in Canada at the time of the 1986 Census. Notably, this includes all residents of all provinces and both territories, persons living on Indian reserves, and permanent residents of most collective dwellings and health-related institutions. This report includes a demographic analysis of adults with visual impairments who, at the time of the survey, were residing in private households. Unlike Pals, the comprehensive analysis of the Hals data on blindness and visual impairment enables one to understand how this disability can affect people's participation in their communities. Moreover, the survey enables comparisons between the visually impaired population, and the non-disabled population, which highlights the impact of visual impairment. From the following table, statistics indicate that of the visually impaired population, 8.7 % have been diagnosed with legal blindness.

Table 1: Both Sexes: Disabled Persons with a Vision Impairment who are Legally Blind Aged 15 and Over Residing in Household by Age Group, Canada.

<u>Age Group (15 and over)</u>	<u>Diagnosed with legal blindness 20/200</u>	<u>Percentage of Vision Impaired population</u>
All ages	38, 665	8.7%
15-29 years	3, 855	12.9%
30-64 years	16, 440	9.4%
65 years and over	18, 370	7.6%

(Hals, 1990:6)

In 1986, an estimated 51, 005 individuals or almost nine percent of the visually impaired population indicated that they had been diagnosed by an eye specialist as being legally blind. The following tables report the characteristics of those 445, 875 disabled

persons aged 15 and over with a visual impairment who were residing in households. This population represents 77% of the visually disabled population of visually disabled adults. 38, 665 reported that they had been diagnosed with legal blindness. These individuals represent 76% of the legally blind population in Canada at the time of the consensus. There were 28, 525 children under the age of 15 who had a vision problem and 4, 380 of those who were diagnosed as legally blind. There were also 106, 710 disabled adults residing in health-related institutions who reported a visual impairment and of those, 7,960 reported that they were legally blind.

The following tables illustrates the distribution of legal blindness among the females and males.

Table 2: Males and Females with a Vision Impairment who are Legally Blind Aged 15 and Over Residing in Households by Sex, by Age Group, Canada

Males			Females		
<u>Age-Group</u>	<u>Legally Blind</u>	<u>% of vision Impaired population</u>	<u>Age-Group</u>	<u>Legally Blind</u>	<u>% of vision Impaired population</u>
All ages	20, 110	11.7%	All ages	18, 555	6.8%
15-29 years	2, 305	14.2%	15-29 years	1, 550	11.3%
30 to 64 years	10, 460	13.6%	30 to 64 years	5, 980	6.1%
65 years and over	7, 345	9.3%	65 years and over	11, 025	6.8%

(Hals, 1990:7)

Within the vision impaired population, 38, 665 or 8.7% report that they have been diagnosed with legal blindness. Males report a much higher rate at 11.7% as compared to females at 6.8%. Among the age groups, those aged 15 to 29 report the highest rate of

legal blindness (14.2% for males and 11.3% for females).

The following table reviews the visually impaired population by age within province and territory in Canada.

Table 3: Visually Impaired Population Aged 15 and Over Residing in Households by Age Group by Province and Territory, Canada

Age Group

Province/ Territory	All ages	15 to 29 years %	30 to 64 years %	65 Years and Over %
Canada	445, 875	6.7	39.1	54.2
Newfoundland	10, 600	9.9	43.6	46.5
Prince Edward Island	2, 895	–	29.2	62.7
Nova Scotia	18, 705	9.2	36.4	54.4
New Brunswick	14, 565	6.2	37.9	55.9
Quebec	103, 275	6.2	44.6	49.2
Ontario	164, 455	5.6	37.6	56.8
Manitoba	22, 220	6.1	29.1	64.9
Saskatchewan	20, 000	6.7	32.6	60.8
Alberta	33, 750	8.8	45.0	46.1
British Columbia	54, 855	8.4	36.9	54.6
Yukon	190	–	–	–
Northwest Territories	355	–	57.7	--

(Hals, 1990:8)

Analysis of the data by age within province and territory indicates that Newfoundland has the highest proportion of visually impaired people (9.9%) in the 15 to 29 year age group, and, that the Northwest Territories has the greatest proportion

(57.7%) in the 30 to 64 year age group reflecting the younger population. The province with the highest proportion of visually impaired people in the age group 65 and over is Manitoba at 64.9%.

The following table displays the visually impaired population residing in households showing labour force status by age group at onset of visual impairment in Canada.

Table 4: Visually Impaired Population Aged 15 to 64 Residing in Households Showing Labour Force Status at Onset of Visual Impairment, Canada

Labour Force Status

Age group at Onset	Employed %	Unemployed %	Not in Labour Force %
14 and under	30	9	58
15 to 29	48	7	43
30 to 64	18	4	75
Total, 15 to 64	26	6	65

(Hals, 1990:35)

Table 4 reveals that vision impairment impedes one's participation in the labour force; this effect is more acute as the age of onset of the impairment increases. Detailed examination of the above table indicates that a visually impaired individual in the 15 to 29 year age group is more likely to be employed than a visually impaired individual in either the younger or older age at onset group. The percentage of unemployed in the youngest age at onset group is higher than in the older age at onset groups. The most significant observation regarding age at onset is that those individuals who become visually impaired under the age of 29 are much more likely to be in the labour force (either employed or

unemployed) compared to those individuals who become visually impaired at a later age. Detailed analysis of age at onset and labour force participation would suggest that the later the age of visual impairment during the working years, the greater the chance of leaving the workforce (Hals, 1991:36). It is essential to take into consideration that a good proportion of those between the ages of 55 to 64 may also be experiencing withdrawal from the labour force due to retirement and early retirements.

International Comparison

The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and other societies for prevention of blindness in many countries of the world have organized various campaigns on the prevention of blindness in various parts of the world. The international comparison research indicates several different countries offering statistical insight in various cross-cultural comparisons.

The World Health Organization's (WHO) finding suggest that there are about 45, 000, 000 visually handicapped people among a 6 000, 000, 000 world population. Close to 1 percent of the world is visually handicapped. More than 90 percent of them live in developing countries where medical and social care are insufficient. In affluent countries where less than 20% of world population live, only 0.2% of the population is visually handicapped. As in other medical and rehabilitational problems, the prevention and rehabilitation of blindness is especially a serious social concern in developing countries. Blind people living in rural areas constitute 80% of the blind population in developing countries. They are scattered throughout millions of isolated and remote villages. For lack of an adequate and well organized delivery and service system, it is going to be extremely

difficult to ensure the fundamental human rights of the rural disabled (Nakajima, 2000, 1). World-wide, Vitamin A deficiency is the leading cause of childhood blindness, responsible for an estimated 70% of the 500,000 children who became blind each year (Thylefors, Negrel, Pararajasegaram, & Dadzie, 1995).

United States of America

In 1995, Lighthouse International reported that one in six Americans (17%), 45 years of age or older, representing 13.5 million middle-age and older adults, report some form of vision impairment even when wearing glasses or contact lenses. This includes blindness in one or both eyes, the inability to recognize a friend across the room, the inability to read regular newspaper print, self-reported poor or very poor vision, or report of any other trouble seeing even when wearing glasses or contacts. The prevalence of self-reported vision impairment increases with age. Only 2% of all Americans aged 45 and older report that they are blind in both eyes (Lighthouse Inc., 1995:2). Based on data collected from the Lighthouse National Survey, 7.2 million (9%) Americans aged 45 and older report a severe vision impairment, defined as an inability to recognize a friend at arm's length even when wearing glasses or contact lenses. They also have reported not being able to read an ordinary newspaper even when wearing glasses or contact lenses, and, or, have reported poor or very poor vision even when wearing glasses or contact lenses. The other is being blind in both eyes.

In 1992, approximately, 1.1 million Americans (0.45%) were labeled as legally blind and defined with a clinically measured visual acuity of 20/200 or less, or, a visual

field in the better eye after optimal correction of 20 degrees or less (Chiang, Bassi, & Javitt). An estimated 163, 078 Americans aged 20-44, and 174, 000 aged 45-64 are legally blind (Chiang, Bassi, & Javitt, 1992). Based on a 1992 survey of college freshmen, 2.0% of full-time freshmen report being "blind or partially sighted." National estimates for legal blindness indicate that 2, 561 children under 5 and 50, 699 between the ages of 5-19 are legally blind (Chian, bassi, & Javitt, 1992).

In 1997, McNeil's research found that nationally, among persons aged 21 to 64 who were visually impaired, and who were defined as having difficulty or inability to see words and letters, only 43.7% were employed; among persons unable to see words and letters this figure decreases to 30.8%. This proportion is significantly lower than the estimated 80% of persons without disability in this age group who are employed (McNeil, 1997). According to the American Diabetes Association (1997), diabetes is the leading cause of blindness in persons age 20-74. An estimated 12,000 to 24,000 people lose their sight each year from diabetic retinopathy.

Across all provinces in the country, there are several institutions that help provide the blind and other visually impaired population facilitate access to, or performance of daily personal or occupational tasks. For instance, the CNIB provides such resource centres across the country and consult on a variety of elements required to help assist the visually impaired population in maintaining daily efficacy. Similarly, there are other non-profit organizations and community based intervention programs that provide rehabilitation among other services to compromise assistance in establishing eligibility in helping their clients reach the full potential of regaining full independence. These

organizations are established and run by professionals who assist their clientele with an active process of selecting those programs and services which are desirable, applicable, and most important in the rehabilitation process. They help network support groups for people who are blind and visually impaired. They also help facilitate to educate and improve the attitudes towards those with the condition.

The next chapter takes us through an understanding of the social condition of being blind through a North American and cross-cultural perspective. With the changing evolution, we are constantly reminded how overall perspectives have influenced our new way of interpreting a physical condition which has social significance and new meaning for understanding what it feels like to live with a stigma.

CHAPTER 2

THEORIZING DISABILITY

My research thoroughly examines how blindness can be a highly recognized and stigmatized condition in the social world. Among many disabilities, blindness can elicit rejection from a multiple of resources in the outer social context. The blind may clearly constitute as a stigmatized group for which they can have no control over. It may also be inordinately difficult for one to cover up the identity of being blind.

In 1963, Erving Goffman introduced the sociological study of disabilities with his classic *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. In this chapter, we will review his work, and also the new criticism of his work by disability activists and the disabilities studies. This new ‘social model’ of disabilities including blindness switches the focus from disability as ‘spoiled identity’ to society as a spoiler, from the individual as object to subject, and from society as a given, to society as a problem.

This chapter looks at three specific perspectives for understanding the construction of disability. It begins by introducing Erving Goffman’s theory of stigma, and then discusses the medical and social model of disability. The latter discusses the interplay between the disabled’s life and their connection within the wider society.

Erving Goffman

This chapter begins with Goffman, the principal theorist on stigma, and his work will be discussed. Although Goffman does not discuss in depth the particular question of legal blindness and stigmatization, his theory considers the condition of people with

disabilities. At another level, sociology turns its attention to social roles and norms, and how they are regulated in society. The social construction of concepts, such as blindness and stigma, is a process through which individuals are regulated by main institutions of social control. This approach largely plays a role in a better understanding of how a specialized role can facilitate a blind person's ability to adapt and adjust to their condition.

Erving Goffman's work on "Stigma and Social Identity" is a reflection of his concern with self-presentation and the impact which our performances have on our self-evaluations, as well the opinions of our larger audience. We've already seen that maintenance of self-esteem is crucial to our developments, as Charles Horton Cooley pointed out in the "Looking Glass Self." Goffman's discussion here is consistent with that assumption, but his focus is much broader. The breadth and depth of Goffman's approach can be seen when we consider his definition of what it means to be stigmatized.

The Spoiled Identity

In his classic study: *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman takes us through the elaborate process that offers to show the ways society categorizes people through social interaction. Goffman's work is primarily derived from several autobiographies and case studies as he primarily draws on the plight of the physically challenged and the blind, and other 'discredited' individuals, for example, prisoners, alcoholics, visible minorities, and those others with certain diseases or illnesses. Goffman makes 'abominations of the body' a sociological topic of discussion, as it reflects the societal reactions. For Goffman, there is the potential for applying labeling theory to people with an array of disabilities. In his discussion, he illustrates the situation of people

who are for an array of reasons devalued and negatively labeled by the wider society. He establishes the means of categorizing a person. The compliment of their attributes is felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories.

Goffman defines stigma as an, “attribute that is deeply discrediting” (1963, p.3). He explains that the “term stigma will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed” (1963, p.3). Originally, the term ‘stigmatize’ referred to the branding or markings of certain people in order to make them appear different and separate from others who fit into the so called ‘normal’ category of the spectrum.

The term stigma can conceal a double perspective. Does the stigmatized individual assume his differentness is known about already, or is it evident on the spot, or does he assume it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them? Stigma reveals the definition of a typical ‘normal human being’ may have it’s roots in the medical historical approach, but is much connected to the normative mode of grading people on a scale.

Goffman distinguishes between three basic types or forms of stigma:

- (1) “Abominations of the body” which include various physical deformities, as well as conditions such as blindness, deafness, and muteness. Examples of the first category can include the blind man. In each of these cases, ‘undesired differentness’ from the so called ‘normals’ provides the underpinning basis for stigma.
- (2) “Blemishes of the individual character” which include characterological flaws,

such as weak will, unnatural passions, and dishonesty. These are manifested in aberrations such as homosexuality, substance abuse, criminality, and mental disease.

(3) “Tribal stigma”, which alludes to membership in a disadvantaged or devalued racial, ethnic, or religious groups. They can subsume any other qualities the person may possess: “...an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us” (Goffman, 1963:14).

According to Goffman’s theory, there are many aspects of human conditions that falls into this criteria. The stigma can include any other qualities that a person may possess: “... an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of who he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us. He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (Goffman, 1963:3-4). The stigma now becomes the emblem, the fault of reducing from our minds our ability to see him as a whole and unusual person to a tainted and discounted one. It now becomes the discrediting effect. It constitutes a special bond between a virtual and social identity. It begins to re-classify an individual from one socially anticipated category to a different but equally well anticipated one. Therefore, we could say that the term stigma can be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should also be seen as a language of relationships. It can be defined as an attribute that stigmatizes and confirms

the normalcy of another, and confirms the unusualness of the other. It can also be responsible for the crediting and discrediting of others.

For Goffman, “society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the compliment of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” (1963:2). Goffman refers to the others who possess the potential to stigmatize others as the ‘normals’. The normals can also be referred as the non-stigmatized. The ‘normals’ do not deviate, nor depart from the particular expectations of the standard norm. They have many attributes, however, they do not represent any “undesired differentness.” The act of marking others resulted in the ‘exile’, and avoidance of certain individuals. Apart from exercising a variety of discrimination, they demoralize the stigmatized by having the tendency to “impute a wide variety of imperfections on the basis of the original one” (Goffman, 1963:5).

The stigmatized individual is often viewed less than a human being and is more likely to suffer a variety of discrimination. These assumptions create sources of validation that evoke the ‘normals’ to exercise varieties of discrimination through which they effectively and unthinkingly do not realize reduce their life chances (Goffman, 1963:5). The demoralization limits their opportunities in the outside world, and conditions them to accept the responsibility for the root cause of their condition and irrationalities. This becomes a method for rationalizing this obtrude animosity based on difference.

The latter could also be known as the “horns effect” (Synnott, 1993:74). In studying the power of beauty and ugliness in society, Berscheid and Walster, and Synnott, maintain that the impact of physical appearance is present everywhere. The “horns effect”

has its outcome, which researchers describe as the “halo effect.” In the study, students agreed that beautiful people were generally more sociable, kind, and exciting and interesting than less attractive people (1993:74-77). Moreover, attractive children were found to be more popular among their peers; and teachers as well as parents had higher expectations of attractive individuals. ‘Social intercourse’ in established settings allows us “deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought” (1963:2). Goffman contends that when a stranger comes into our presence, their first appearances allow us to categorize his attributes, what you would call, their ‘social identity.’ We learn to lean on these anticipations that we have, and transform them into ‘normative expectations’ that soon in itself turn into demands. We internalize these expectations and fail to acknowledge them as demands. If the stranger does not meet our expectations or demands, then he is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (1963:3). Goffman presumes a value consensus which unites both ‘normals’ and the ‘stigmatized’ in recognizing who is normal and who is not.

The discredited, and the discreditable

Goffman distinguishes between the *discredited* and the *discreditable*. The *discredited* are those stigmatized individuals who assume that his or her differentness is known about or is readily apparent to others. The *discreditable*, on the other hand, are attributes that are not readily apparent, and therefore, stigmatization may not be the end result. Goffman distinguishes those with a visible stigma, the so-called ‘discredited’ from the ‘discreditable,’ whose differentness is not immediately apparent. For those with a visible stigma, the dilemma is how to manage the tension involved in social encounters,

and once could recover their identity. For instance, persons with discreditable traits, such as ex-convicts, fear that their secret will be revealed and are willing to take the necessary steps to protect themselves from such exposure. The ability and management of undisclosed discrediting information about oneself is what Goffman refers to as 'passing' (1963:42). Goffman asserts that "because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent" (1963:74). It becomes important for the stigmatized to make an effort to correct or conceal their deficiencies. Responses may range from changes in physical appearance, such as plastic surgery (to remove unwanted skin conditions), to heroic feats (the blind person who learns how to ski).

According to Goffman, our physical appearance affects our opportunities and life chances in the outer contexts. Even if they become victimized by 'fraudulent claims', and even if their efforts are successful, they still are not likely to be considered 'normal' They once had a particular blemish and now corrected it but the stigma lingers (1963:9). The central feature for the stigmatized in this situation is if possible, to make a direct attempt to correct what he sees as the objective of his failing. Where there is a direct attempt to fix the problem, a transformation may for some become the best solution to adhere proneness to victimization. Others compensate for their misfortunes by stressing achievements in other areas of life. Others, exploit the stigma for 'secondary gain' so that it becomes an excuse for not being able to do certain things. Sexual offenders for instance fall into this category. Once they are released from prison, they fear that their past identity will be unveiled to the community. They will do anything possible for their identity to be kept a

secret.

Goffman contends that “visibility” of a particular stigma is a “crucial factor” when determining whether an individual is to be stigmatized or not (1963:48). Attributes such as skin color and particular physical disabilities provide visible evidence of stigma so their bearer can be immediately discredited. The more prominent the stigma, the more likely it will effect the individual’s social interactions. Since the normals assume that the stigmatized are abnormal, it is obvious that “acceptance” is the “central feature of the stigmatized individual’s situation in life” (Goffman, 1963:8). How does an individual respond to the devastating consequences of what Goffman calls a “spoiled identity?”

Conversely, the issue confronting the discreditable is how to control information about their ‘differentness’: “To play or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where” (1968, p.57). Goffman references two other strategies: covering and withdrawal. ‘Covering’ is a dilemma of the “discredited with tension to manage” (125), that is where the stigma is known and every effort is made to ensure that it does not overwhelm social encounters. For instance, a blind man who wears dark glasses to conceal the evidence of having a visible disfigurement in the eye region as a result of blindness.

‘Withdrawal’ entails removal from social activities with ‘normals’ altogether. Staying away from the normals can get them to self-isolate themselves and be suspicious of the world around them. For the stigmatized to adjust to their predicament presumes an attempt: first, “to make the best of things,” and cultivate a “cheerful, outgoing manner;” second, not to go too far in “normalization” lest these efforts embarrass “normals,” or be

construed as an attempt to deny any differentness; and third to avoid self-pity or resentment (Goffman, 1968: 38-49). And this is why many have their own in-group alignments. They sympathize with others who share their stigma. Knowing from their own experiences what it is like to have this particular stigma, they seek one another for moral support, and gather in small social groups.

Goffman's theory of stigma contends that in certain situations, the stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs others in society hold of them. These beliefs equip them to believe that he or she is in fact a failure. Others tend to become uncertain of the normal's perception. For instance, the blind man may discover that his female co-worker thinks she's a great friend, but not good enough for a date. This would only seem like the normal way of responding to her since he does not acknowledge her as a human being. Sometimes other stigmatized try to alter or reform their appearances in order to be accepted.

The stigmatized can also attempt to correct his condition by devoting much of his private time and effort to the mastering of an activity felt to be closed to them with due to his shortcoming. In Goffman's work, the example of the blind person who becomes an expert at skiing and mountain climbing becomes reflective of an attempt to correct the condition. Tortured learning becomes a necessity to prove to the outside 'normal' world that nothing can stop them from living as anyone else would.

Goffman (1963) contends that should the stigmatized resume to their 'resident alien' role, this means that the "good adjustment" of the stigmatized is actually a quality granted to them by others. He suggests that if the stigmatized fails to commit to the

standard expectations of the normals, or becomes defensive, we may perceive his defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his defect, and hence we justify the way we treat him.

Goffman's perspectives on the creation of a blind man's role is emulated in Robert's Scott's, *The Making of Blind Men* (1969). Scott argues that blind men are not born, 'they are made' by professionals. There is a broad continuum defining perfect vision to total blindness. According to Scott, the "disability of blindness is a learned role" (p.14). Similarly, Vader (1992) concludes that the 'origins of stigma' placed on the handicapped including the blind and visually impaired are largely connected to the mores and values in social structure throughout history (712).

More frequently, however, the stigmatized employ a narrative which emphasizes what can be salvaged from their experience, what they and others can 'learn' from it. Those whose bodies are crippled focus on the life of the mind and the development of empathy, and as Goffman points out, can gain a sense of comfort from re-assessing the 'limitations of normals.' For instance, he uses the example of a mother disabled from polio that writes,

"I know my awareness of people has deepened and increased, that those who are close to me can count on me to turn all my mind and heart to their problems, I could not have learned that dashing all over a tennis court" (p.11)

Correspondingly, the stigmatized can re-assess the limitations of normals. One blind writer explains:

"That would lead immediately to the thought that there are many occurrences which can diminish satisfaction in living far more effectively than blindness, and

that would be an entirely healthy one to take. In this light, we can perceive, for instance, that some inadequacy like the inability to accept human love, which can effectively diminish satisfaction of living almost to the vanishing point, is far more a tragedy than blindness. But it is unusual for the man who suffers from such a malady even to know he has it and self pity is therefore, impossible for him” (Chevigny, 1950:154).

In order for the stigmatization to occur, the ‘discrediting’ attribute must be known by others with whom the interactions takes process with. Goffman persists to acknowledge the manner in which the society’s normative system confers to an expected social identity which has been established in part by the rulers of society (1963:11). The normative system plays justification for treating those with a stigma as being ‘not quite human’ (Goffman, 1963:15).

Goffman contends that “visibility” of a particular stigma is a ‘crucial factor’ when determining whether an individual is to be stigmatized or not (1963:48). The attributes such as skin color and particular physical disabilities provide the visible evidence of stigma, so their identity can be immediately discredited. The more prominent the stigma, the more likely it will effect the individual social interactions.

Goffman’s interest focuses on the strained interaction which occurs when the so-called ‘normals’ and stigmatized individuals mingle, and how both of these groups engage in ‘identity talk’ in order to preserve their self-esteem. The communicative interaction between the normals and stigmatized affects the personal adjustment and responses of the stigmatized. For Goffman, if the ‘normals’ assume that the stigmatized are not quite human, and then choose whether to reject or accept them (often in a grudging or patronizing manner) on that basis, then it becomes obvious that ‘acceptance’ is the

“central feature of the stigmatized individual’s situation in life” (1963:8). Nevertheless, there remains considerable scope for uncertainty in encounters between ‘normals’ and ‘stigmatized’, and Goffman payed specific attention to the ways in which the stigmatized attempted to manage their *spoiled identity*.

According to Goffman, the way in which the ‘stigmatized’ adjusts to the social responses of society depend on whether the individual has an ‘inborn stigma,’ or whether it is acquired later in life. For example, a child born with a congenital eye impairment may be socialized to expect from early on, while another, with the same condition, may be protected by their parents from society’s denial of their ‘normal identity.’ On the other hand, for a person who acquires a stigmatized condition later in life, the dilemma insists is one of ‘re-identification.’ They see their presumed identity as false, or that their former identity is no longer applicable in society. A final possibility arises where an individual is socialized into an ‘alien community’ and must then learn the norms and values of the so-called ‘normal society’.

Shame can become a central possibility arising form the individual’s perception of his own attributes as being a contaminating thing to possess, once he knows it will always underlie his chances of living a normal life. The immediate presence of normals can likely reinforce this stigmatized to feel caught in between a world of self-demands for one’s own self, in self-hate, and self-derogation when we become the analytical tools of society (Goffman, 1963). This means during these mixed contacts, the stigmatized person is likely to feel self-conscious and calculating the impressions he’s been making. Trying to manage his impressions is of most importance. If he succeeds, which Goffman doubts, he will have

successfully performed. It now becomes essential for the stigmatized to manage their impressions.

Stigma of the Blind

Goffman is insightful about the visually impaired and blind people. Throughout 'Stigma' he uses complimentary examples to illustrate their everyday experiences to the relevance of his theoretical framework. The legally blind have "abominations of the body" that elicit immediate negative assessment from outer context. The blemish is so visible that managing it becomes extremely difficult. Persons with legal blindness will have a difficult time to conceal their impairment. For instance, someone who is blind cannot take the chance of refusing to use their white cane when crossing at a busy intersection. However, they can at times disguise their eyes by wearing regular dark glasses. Sometimes, they may even learn to look directly at someone's face when verbally interacting with them in order to avoid the disguise. Thus, wearing the dark glasses, and using the white cane become items that help prevent them from disguising their stigma.

Some of my respondents fail to do certain things like reading braille on the bus when going to work. They often feel the non-verbal presence of others watching over them even though they cannot see them directly. According to Goffman (1963), this type of behavior allows the person with the visual impairment to 'cover' or 'conceal' his/her discredited traits (102). The only difficult part for them becomes when their stop is next and they have to get up. Then the white cane is brought to the attention of the public. At that instant, Goffman's theory suggests that the individual becomes 'discredited' and becomes a target for stigma.

The stigma of the blind becomes present in situations when certain persons are not aware of the impairment and then become shocked once they are in social interaction with the blind. Someone who is knowledgeable about visual impairment will view the blind as having a visual problem and not view it as an individuals' power to change.

Since the publication of Goffman's classic's 'Stigma,' the conditions that evoked negative reactions toward people that fall under the spectrum of people with disabilities has changed tremendously. Since the late 1970's there has been a growing effort to increase political lobbying in order to integrate people with disabilities into the larger society. Goffman's theory cleared the path to give the disability population legal rights to full participation in society. For instance, we can begin with the introduction of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that guarantees the rights of all people with disabilities.

The Charter states:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Thus, according to the legislation in Canada, it is against the law to treat someone unjustly on the basis of their disability. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms sites an example of this: "It is illegal to refuse to rent an apartment to a person, hire them for a job or serve them in a store because of their disability." In addition, following the same lines, The Canadian Human Rights Act as well as the human rights codes in each province and territory also protects the right of people with disabilities.

The American Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in the United States in 1990. The amendment prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities in areas such as employment, public accommodations and housing. The ADA's broad scope prohibits discrimination on the basis of actual disability and the employer's perception of disability. The ADA states the following:

The ADA gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities similar to those provided to individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment transportation, state and local government services and telecommunications (1990).

Despite these efforts, thousands of individuals with disabilities continue to experience various forms of devaluation and discrimination. Within the language sphere, for many, the word 'blind' connotes an unfavorable response by many visually impaired persons. There are various types of visual impairment, and it is not to say that all people fall into one category. Referring to all visually impaired people as 'blind' clusters them into the same equilibrium. As stated by one of my respondents, "I prefer to say I have a visual impairment.'

Disability Studies:

The social model of disability stresses the importance of investigating the interplay between an individual's life; the interplay between an individual's everyday life and the wider society. It leads to consideration of key issues and perspectives that will furnish a framework for a sociologically informed account of disability. According to the social model of disability, the starting point plays emphasis on the social construction of

disability.

A sociological approach to theorizing blindness suggests that the common meaning associated with blindness emerges from a specific social and cultural context. The social model of disability has offered a significant contribution to helping people realize how many personal troubles which affect individual's personal relations with others are more appropriately understood as 'public issues' which link to the institution of society as a whole. The social model takes up the claim that attitudes and behaviour which seem essential are more appropriately understood as a social product. It's essential to examine how and why some attitudes and practices towards the blind have varied historically. No doubt that the social model presents a case theorizing blindness from no universal character or meaning.

Research in the field of disability has evolved as a way of addressing how people with legal blindness have been regarded and treated historically and how they continue to be treated. For instance, it's hard to imagine that ancient Judaism once regarded impairments, such as blindness, as a symbol of punishment for wrong doing, and justification for separating the good from the bad (Barnes et al., 1999). In these popular medieval cultures, shrines were also seen as a traditional feature of healing and there was a long record of conflicts as the Church sought to maintain it's regular medicine. There was of course, opposition to medical charges. These were viewed as contrary to the healing of Christian cures. The world of medical intervention seemed to interplay and contradict with the world of Christian faith.

With the rise of commercialization of land and agriculture, the 19th century

witnessed a significant growth in industrialization and urbanization. Oliver's 'Politics of Disablement' (1990) carries the materialist analysis further exploring how people with impairments were categorized as a social problem, and were no longer easily integrated into the societal economic system, and of course, were depicted as a potential drain on social welfare.

At this time the scientific medical profession was succeeding in medicalizing impairments. This gave way to a radical shift in the treatment of the disabled population. This new shift gave way to the expansion of segregation of institutions. In practice the establishment of scientific medicine imposed new forms of social surveillance and discipline for the disabled population. In Britain, society was now labeled as the 'aged' and 'infirm.' The latter was separated from the 'sick,' the 'insane,' and the 'defectives' (Stone, 1985). The 'defectives' were defined as those with visual, hearing, or communication impairments, but extended to include in the early 20th century to the mentally ill population including those with epilepsy. Attempts to contain and confine proliferated were first to be built for the mentally ill. In attempts to constrain the disabled individuals from societal contact, residential and educational facilities for the blind and deaf were established (Scull, 1979). This gave way to the segregation, isolation, and infantilization of the disabled population. The 'blind' became a so-called alien threat to society.

In the 1920's, the policy and research agenda in disability was driven by the medical model, in which people were seen as sick and in need of a cure (Rioux, 1994:2). The disabled population became increasingly brought to the attention widespread. The

medical field had now opened its doors to medical specialities and professionals. This introduction had now brought attention to a whole new set of rehabilitative medicine and interventions that were gradually going to ameliorate the health status of the disabled individual by alienating them from the active part of society (Barnes et al., 1999). The emphasis was on the skills development and helping people take care of themselves. Rehabilitative programs were implemented to help the blind and other disabled individuals find ways to cope with 'normal' life expectations so that they did not become a burden to themselves and society. The introduction of the medicalization of disability represented the establishment of an 'individual' model of disability that became the professional, policy and lay orthodoxy through the 20th century.

By the 20th century, the medical model had still established that the focus still heavily remained on 'body abnormality,' deficiency, and functional limitation. Once the individual is defined as disabled, it becomes their defining characteristic and their incapacity now becomes generalized. Not being able to see reflected your functional incapacity to lead an independent life. The person is now marked as invalid. Disability now becomes their defining character, and their incapacity to function as independent people is generalized. Many such researchers argue that the medical model has discouraged full citizenship for people with disabilities. Within the medical model disability approach focuses on the impairment rather than the person. It is quite clear that power will always reside with the medical professions. This now becomes a basis for what he calls a '*personal tragedy*' approach. The perspective regards the disabled individual as a victim, and as someone who is need of 'care' and 'attention' and dependent on others. And it is

this view which encourages contemporary social welfare policies (Oliver, 1983; Finkelstein,1993). With this individual model of disability, the solution lies solely in rehabilitative medical intervention with an increasing involvement of health practitioners and educators. The medical experts now define the individual's needs and how they should be met. The intervention goal is to overcome, or at least minimize the negative consequences of the individual's disability.

The initiative behind the rehabilitative process over the years has increased a growing range of policy initiatives all over the world. Growing concern from various health professionals, and experts to address the 'special needs' and 'personal difficulties' of the disabled population have been maintained. The medicalization of disability was concerned to diagnose the bodily or intellectual 'abnormality' and advise the required treatment they sought fit. The labeling of the patient as having the inability to perform essential daily requirements underpins them as not being able to overcome independent routines. Unfortunately, this serves as a barrier preventing them from achieving successfully. As a result, this disadvantage serves as an impairment that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role for that individual. In sum, the individual model in the disablement process is represented in the following pattern.

Figure A.:

Disease of Disorder-> Impairment——> Disability-----> Handicap
 (intrinsic situation)-----(Exteriorized)---- (objectified)——(socialized)

The individual model assumes that the disabled population are largely dysfunctional, and are acted upon, rather than active (Barnes et al., 1999). This view tries

to illustrate that they can rely on others for care and charity than provide it for others. They presume that any type of intervention solely depends on policy-makers and other service providers. This disadvantage is perceived as an individual and not a collective matter. In turn, model renders the disabled individual the possibility of perceiving themselves unavailable to speak for themselves. As a result, the disabled person is expected to make every effort and the best of their circumstances by adjusting to what intervention specialists have set fit for their coping strategies. The disabled person is brought to a level of subordination, assuming that the disability has taken over their identity. Individuals who are forced into this role accept it's requirements and duties, and accredit their role by being socialized into a traditionally oriented identity. The model negates the negative consequences of living in such an environment, and disregards it as disabling barriers. Giving into this fallacy, sets aside the influence of social or other mediums which foster then management in helping a disabled person to cope better, or to become more independent.

Then in the sixties, disabilities began to be seen though a sociological model which focuses on the stigmatizing process (e.g. Goffman, 1963), and through a psychological model where their experiences have been individualized and pathologized (Harris and Lewin, 1998). This approach envisioned disability as a physiological problem or set of unfortunate individual circumstances in need of solutions offered by certain medical interventionists, such as social workers or social counselors.

Disability Studies: Towards a Social Model of Understanding Blindness

It was not until the 1970's and 80's that disabled activists and their organizations

voiced an increasing criticism of the medical model of disability. The new Disability Studies movement from the eighties offers a conceptual framework whereby disability is viewed as a social construct. A sociological model of disability stressed a framework for understanding disability as a result from the effects of society geared towards able-bodiedness as the norm, rather than a person's physical, sensory, or mental impairment (Hughes and Patterson, 1997). Abberley (1987) notes that the concept of oppression is useful here because using that term helps us to understand how social forces have been gathered to discourage individuals with disabilities from exercising their rights. In Abberley's view, this oppression is the result of the root in historical workings, and can only be changed through societal action. Through a collaborated effort a social approach to disability was now finally established.

What once started in Britain, has now spread to North America and other European countries around the world (Barnes et al., 1999). Individuals from various disabled categories, including the visually impaired, argued that it was society which disabled people with impairments, and therefore any meaningful solution to the dilemma should be directed at societal change, rather than individual adjustment and rehabilitation. The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) was vanguard for those calling for an alternative model of disability. In 1976, in its Fundamental Principles document, the UPIAS placed the responsibility for disability on society's own failures: "In our view it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in

society“ (UPIAS, 1976:14).

According to the UPIAS an impairment consists when an individual lacks a part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body. On the other-hand, disability becomes the “disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities” (UPIAS, 1976: 3-4). Following these definitions, the UPIAS regard disability as the outcome of an “oppressive relationship between people with... impairments and the rest of society” (Finkelstien, 1980, p.7). What this all means is that once the individual is defined as a disabled person, they are stigmatized and the social expectations about how should behave, or, what they are capable of doing, exert an influence independent of their impairment.

This assumption is that any form of disability is derived from a profile of ‘social oppression.’ The social model perspective takes into account that any disability calls for disabling barriers caused by the wider spectrum of society. In 1980, Mile Oliver’s alternative formulation of questions used to assess disability in the 1980's by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) was challenged. His survey questions counter-predicted what OPCS would have otherwise reported in their findings. Oliver’s social-model approach to conducting survey research differed from OPCS in the following manner:

1. OPCS: ‘Can you tell me what is wrong with you?’
2. Oliver: ‘Can you tell me what is wrong with Society?’

- 1.OPCS: ‘Are your difficulties in understanding people mainly due to a

hearing problem?’

2. Oliver: ‘Are your difficulties in understanding people mainly due to their inability to communicate with you?’

(Oliver, 1990: 7-8).

In summary, a social model approach to understanding visual impairment, or any other disability for that matter concentrates on the set of causes that are established externally to the disabled individual. Thus, this means we’re looking at the obstacles imposed on the disabled society which limit their opportunities to participate as functional and independent societal members. Keeping this in mind, measures of any form of disability should provide a way of monitoring the effects of physical, social, and economic disabling barriers experienced by all caste-members of disabled people. Their social exclusion from divergent spheres of society should be continually examined, and this should provide a way of monitoring the effects that this may have in anti-discrimination policies. As Oliver suggests, for long, the “*personal tragedy theory*” has served to individualize the problems of disability and hence leave social and economic structures untouched” (Oliver, 1986, p.16).

Exploring the coping strategies of blindness from a sociological perspective can be quite the challenge and yet so resourceful. There have been a wide variety of contributions made from sociological theories suggesting that society itself can disable people with impairments. Offerings to the development of a social theory have ranged widely. Forms of domination in society have given us reason to raise complex issues that have not yet been determined, or explored thoroughly by active agents. I have learnt that a sociological model of blindness should consider a wide range of social and material factors and

conditions that have continued to play a role at disabling individuals who are enabled. The divergent spheres throughout the projectory of our life (private versus public settings of our life) demonstrates an emergent experience. This spans the individual's experience of disability in multiple life settings which are constant familiarities on a day to day basis. These wider circumstances may enforce disabling barriers and attitudes.

With the establishment of Disability Studies, disability is now viewed as a social construct. The term can be considered a culturally constructed minority identity. It becomes the political, aesthetic, and ethical concern, and encompasses a universal human experience. Disability studies perspectives trace to find the root problem in society rather than the individual (Harris and Lewin, 1998). The nature and significance in the disabilities depend on the manner in which they are viewed and interpreted. (Bogdan and Taylor, 1994). Hence, the solution lies not in the person with the impairment, but in the person without the disability. It begins by removing the barriers that limit people with disabilities while encouraging the pathway in fully participating in their communities while promoting the priorities of social well-being. It identifies the ways to increase individual control over social well being, rather than defining social well being as the absence of disability (Rioux, 1994:5). As Morris so eloquently states, "it is not the inability to walk which disables someone, but the steps into the building" (Morris, 1991:10).

Over the last few decades there has clearly been a shift from Goffman's theory of 'spoiled identity,' whereby people with the disabilities are stigmatized by the 'normals,' to the introduction of Disability Studies where we concentrate on the 'identity spoilers' who are ultimately the 'normals.' With the introduction of Disability Studies, a new perspective

reveals a pervasive revelation that has for so long largely ignored or mis-recognized (Thomson, 1997). Disability studies provides insight to the eliminating social and physical barriers that create disability and promotes social well being and priorities. The new social model provides ways to increase individual control over one's social well being, rather than allowing the disability to control the social well being of the person (Rioux, 1994:5). The new Disabilities Studies, attempts to call for the inclusion of all people with disabilities into the mainstream society, but aims to introduce a new kind of language and outlook that reveals the potentiality of the disabled, something that has been largely ignored and mis-recognized in the past (Thomsan, 1997).

Final Thoughts

Sociology, as a discipline concentrates on social action. In order to understand our social world, sociology sees that it is necessary to explore it's meaning for 'social actors,' and how its uncertainties and dilemmas are investigated (Barnes et al., 1999).

Other sociological approaches to blindness assume that human beings are reflective and have their own capacity for choice or 'agency.' The blind person can view their actions both as subjects and objects. This means, humans beings are viewed as active and creative social actors. Nevertheless, they are also constrained in what they may think and do. As mentioned earlier, our ability to become *agents* can be determined by *structure*. We have read in the following chapter how structural determinants play a considerable role in assigning how are social behaviour and attitude can be shaped.

Classical sociology initiates the thought of how social order may be potentially disturbed. The task for our prominent groups in society are to find the ways of how to

perpetuate and enhance their privileged position while achieving compliance of subordinate groups like the blind and other disabled groups. In turn, they legitimize their interests by maintaining that it recognizes diverse policy regulations which stress the existence of regulating order in society. This perception contributes to the overwhelmingly inequalities and exclusion of minority groups, such as the disabled class. Blindness, and other disabled groups have become a more salient and significant factor for a rising proportion of the population.

Exploring the coping strategies of the blind can be done by using Goffman's theoretical approach. Within this framework, there has been a focus of exploring the experience of disability from a micro-level, with particular feelings to the attitudes and feelings of the individual who is blind. It is essential to take into account how their self-identity has changed over time. This ranges broadly from informal contexts such as in the household, and more publicized settings, such as the in the work place. This perspective measures the relationship between self and society. A similar socio-focus might explore blindness not as permanent position, but as a *career* which is affected by changing personal and social circumstances and contexts, and interactions with others, including significantly professional experts. The outcome may be compliance and reciprocity or conflict.

While I distinguish these levels for analytical purposes, it is important to establish the links that unifies them together. A sociological framework for understanding the coping strategies of the blind must be done at a multi-level framework so that it incorporates analyses of the experiences at the individual and societal level. Thus, a

sociological study of blindness understands that it must draw upon a broad spectrum of theoretical perspectives and paradigm.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

An examination of the research on people with blindness shows a lack of research on the social aspects of people who are blind from their own perspective. Individuals who have been defined with legal blindness rarely have had the opportunity to tell their own story. As a counterbalance, my thesis attempts to reveal another kind of research that allows the visually impaired to share their own life narratives. My research attempts to first listen to the pertinent issues that are of concern to the person experiencing the disability, rather than to the issues of concern to the researcher.

Sample Recruitment

In 1990, the Hals (1990) reported that the legally blind constituted about 4.3 percent of the visually impaired population in Quebec. My sample was limited to those individuals who were defined with legal blindness after birth, since I wanted to discuss how people adapt from a visual to an unseen environment. Adapting to the learning of required skills is associated with the turning point of attempting and mastering self-sufficient acts by oneself. This prevents them from acquiring to live in a self-made environment. Effort is necessary when individuals are required to refine and broaden what they have once learned.

This thesis presents data from 12 people, 6 women, and 6 men. This equal selection gave me the opportunity to analyze whether gender played a role in the various coping strategies developed. Only one person was known to me at the beginning of the

process, as he was a member of the Montreal Association for the Blind (MAB). He was able to put me in contact with a few of the other respondents who agreed to participate. In recruiting my other respondents, my sampling design involved the use of a non-probability 'snowball' technique. Since people with legal blindness are difficult to locate in Quebec, I contacted several organizations and associations which dealt extensively with this target population, such as the MAB, Louis Braille Institute, and the Canadian Institute for the Blind (CNIB). Once a few members in this organization agreed to participate, I proceeded in a 'snowball' manner asking each interviewee if he or she knew someone in a similar position who might want to be interviewed.

Sample Characteristics

All the participants ranged from 18-62 years, with a mean age of 36. All have lost their sight within the preceding 10 years. 11 of the participants were Caucasian, and one of them Asian. Eleven of the respondents reside in the island of Montreal, and one in Edmonton Alberta. The participants come from a variety of socio-cultural backgrounds, a range of professions, and socioeconomic status (*see table 1*).

As a result of this study, many blind people have shared their experiences, stories, and lives with me, and for this, I am indebted for their invaluable time and revelations. Allow me to introduce them individually. Since they all preferred that I do not to use their own names I will give them pseudonyms. My respondents share similarities with one another. And in order to distinguish their commonalities, I have decided to group them into two separate categories. Some students were defined with legal blindness at an early age, while others at a later onset in their lives. I will introduce my respondents and group

them by some of their shared characteristics, rather than list them in alphabetical order.

Early onset of legal blindness

In this context, an early onset of legal blindness refers to those who lost their sight from early childhood to late adolescence (5 to 18 years of age). Seven of my respondents fall into this category. I begin with Valerie who has a successful career in social work. At age 42, she recently completed her Master's in Vocational Development. Married with four children, Valerie at birth developed a rare eye disease known as 'anirdia.' She was still able to see, however, several years later, it developed into glaucoma. She remembers 'it was hard to control the glaucoma, the doctors said it was nearly impossible.' On her third operation, the doctor accidentally removed the crystalline from her left eye, as a result she lost complete sight in her left eye at the age of 14. After a long and constant battle with glaucoma, at age 20 Valerie lost complete vision. She carries a genetic dominant code for this particular disease. Her children have the possibility of inheriting the disease. She enjoys life one day at a time, and says that she is having "the time of her life."

Patrick is 18 years old, and has been without complete sight since the age of 11. The glaucoma is a genetic disease coming from his father's side of the family. At a young age his parents noticed that both his eyes were rotating clockwise. At age 3, Patrick was diagnosed with a rare form of glaucoma and was recommended by his eye specialist to begin using eye glasses. At 8 years of age he was considered to have low vision. He describes the situation, "I could still see a fair amount at that time. When I began wearing glasses, I became near sighted." After countless efforts to control the glaucoma, Patrick's extended family came together and managed to accumulate a large sum of money in order

to send him and his family to Canada in hopes of finding better medical attention. In 1991, Patrick's parents thought it would be best to leave the Philippines to come to Montreal in hopes of finding better medical treatment for their son. "My parents and I were sick of the treatment we were getting back home. My aunts, uncles, and cousins agreed that our lives would get better here, because in my country at the time, it was hard." Today, Patrick is finishing up his course requirements in a health and science program, and is on his way to begin a degree in electrical engineering.

Doug, is 19, and is currently a university student in the computer science department. At birth Doug was diagnosed with severe astigmatism (near sightedness). At the age of 3, he was diagnosed with albinism of the retina, and was given eye glasses to wear. He had 20/20 vision only when he was using his eye glasses. Without the use of his eye glasses he was not able to see very well. At age 7, Doug began to notice strange symptoms in the development of his eye sight. It was not until March 2, 1992 that things took on a new level. Doug was in grade 4, and came home one day and he noticed something unusual when he was trying to do his homework. Doug remembers it being a sunny day while he was sitting at his kitchen table trying to calculate some arithmetic problems. He remembers trying to do his homework by the sunshine but something was not right. For some reason the sunshine did not appear as bright as it should have. He remembers trying to move to a brighter area but did not notice any difference in the brightness. After countless surgeries of trying to save Doug's retina, doctors realized that Doug would eventually lose any remaining sight of what he already had. From the age of 16 onwards, Doug had gone from being able to read very large print, to not being able to

read anything.

Mark has been legally blind since the age of 5 due to glaucoma. After several surgical attempts in 1991 to control the glaucoma from spreading any further, any remaining vision that Mark had was quickly vanishing away. In January of 1999, Mark was left with no vision at all and was diagnosed with total blindness. Mark describes the devastation of losing his entire sight as an unforgettable life event. Even though Mark had already experienced the affects of low vision, he was not prepared to deal with the affects of becoming completely blind. Mark states, “mind you, when it happened, I was still not prepared for it, and I had to ask the MAB for some help in order to function better.”

Melissa, is a 23 year-old master’s student in communications. She lost complete vision at 6 years of age due to retinitis pigmentosa. It was especially difficult to handle the stress of being without sight in her childhood years. “My parents didn’t want me going to any sleepovers... my elementary school teachers also kept me from participating in almost all physical activities because they thought I might get hurt playing with other children who could see.” Throughout Melissa’s life, music has played a significant role in helping her readapt and sharpen her life skills in order to maintain a functional lifestyle. Melissa feels most complete with the sound of music. She says it best, “it feels my life with color.”

Mary lost most of her sight at the age of 6. At this age she could not understand why she could only see 8 percent in one eye. After several surgical attempts to save her sight, Mary retained only 8 percent in one eye leaving her legally blind for life. She admits to having very little recollection of what it’s like to see with both eyes, and says that not seeing has become an everyday normal process. Mary’s claims, “it becomes a habit.”

Mary admits that coping with her visual impairment has not always been the easiest thing. She acknowledges that over the years she's always hidden behind it. Mary reveals that relying on her imagination and daydreaming has helped her adjust through the daily frustrations of knowing that she will never again get to see the colors she no longer remembers, and it still helps.

Late onset of legal blindness

The next set of respondents who I interviewed developed legal blindness later in life. I begin with Alan, who is a 62 year-old retired-veteran pilot, who lost complete sight about four years ago due to an embolism of the brain. He explains, "it knocked out my vision completely, I have no remaining sight at all." Living with his wife, Alan keeps himself pretty busy by being the president of the largest stamp club in North America. He's always worked intensively with the mayor of a municipality in establishing sidewalks for the visually impaired.

Helen, is a standup comedian for charity events who also on occasion writes book reviews for a newspaper column. She's also a successful instructor who conducts sensitization workshops at an airport in Quebec. She lost her complete vision in the fall of 1985 when she was only 22 years old. As a result of diabetic retinopathy, she only has 10 percent of vision in her right eye.

Gloria is 39 years old. She works as a receptionist at a youth and social service agency. She has been without sight for the past 20 years. Prior to the loss of sight, she had been partially sighted, and had only 8 percent of vision in one eye. At 14, she began to develop cataracts and glaucoma. By 19 years of age, Alice was diagnosed with cancer of

the retina. Despite the loss of her vision, she remains entirely active performing as a dancer. She's also taken part in several marathons.

Kevin, who is 31, lost complete sight at the age of 25. At birth he was partially sighted with retinitis pigmentosa. He was able to attend regular high-school and cegep. Today he tunes pianos during the evening. During the day, he works for the MAB teaching computer access to other visually impaired. Working for various organizations mostly in fund raising, he still finds some time to be a member of the Lions Club, and be on the board of directors for the Montreal Chapter of Canadian Guide for Dogs for the Blind. He is also on the board of directors for the Quebec Federation of the Blind. As he suggests, "I do all these things because I don't consider myself disabled. I consider myself differently abled... and I think I've come a long way. I also think I've earned the right to coast for a while. I've done most of the things I wanted to do, I just want to have a chance to do lots more of it."

Deborah is a 44 year-old mother and wife who also performs as a dancer. For Deborah, "dancing is another way of seeing." Daily frustrations are released and expressed in her dance routines. In her early 20's, Deborah lost her sight to retinitis pigmentosa. At first she was devastated and could not come to terms with her visual loss. Today, Deborah says that dance has helped her test her own limits and boundaries. This long over due interest as a dance performer has inspired her to live without limits. For Deborah, there should be no limits attached to tasks that we have never tested.

Nelson is a 31 year-old university student studying in the faculty of science. In addition to studying, he is presently involved in creating bio-informatic programs with a

number chairs and advisors in bio-chemistry, computer science, and other programs in the faculty of science. He's living in common law with his wife and step daughter. In 1989, at 18 years of age, he developed diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma. The diseases were developed as a result of juvenile diabetes. Nelson states, "I have no light perception, and all I see is black." For Nelson, the blindness has not prevented him from living his life. He insists, "I have always said that humans are made to adapt to any situation." He still enjoys horseback riding, golf, lawn bowling, cooking, and especially spending quality time with friends and family.

The following table represents the personal characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1: The Respondents

Name	Age	Sex	Residence	Visual Acuity	Occupation	Marital Status
Valerie	42	Female	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Social worker/ -Graduate student in Vocational Development	Married
Patrick	18	Male	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Cegep student in Health and Science Program	Single
Doug	19	Male	Alberta, Canada	20/200	-Undergraduate student in computer engineering	Single
Mark	45	Male	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Mobility Trainer	Married
Melissa	23	Female	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Graduate Student in Communications	Single
Mary	37	Female	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Mobility teaching assistant	Single
Bailey	62	Male	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Retired pilot	Married

Helen	35	Female	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Comedian/ -Book-review columnist/ -Sensitization workshop trainer	Single
Gloria	39	Female	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Dance performer	Single
Kevin	41	Male	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Computer instructor -Activity Coordinator -Piano Tuner	Married
Deborah	44	Female	PQ, Canada	20/200	-Dance performer	Married
Nelson	31	Male	PQ, Canada	20/200	Graduate student in Chemistry & Bio- informatics	Married

The visual acuity of respondents was the equivalency of 20/200 or less, meeting the criteria for legal blindness. All 12 informants use visual aids, such as white canes, large print software, talking computers, braille books, and talking watches in the course of their daily life routines.

Research Design Procedure

It is my intent to provide my respondents with the opportunity to give their own detailed accounts of their life stories. The structure is centered around issues salient to the person experiencing the disability, rather, than issues pertaining to the researcher. Multi-topic life history interviews were conducted, covering a number of key areas eliciting the priorities of the informant.

Rather than relying on rigid questionnaires, I decided to use semi-structured open-ended questions to allow my respondents the opportunity to provide detailed accounts of their life stories. This became important in guiding the evolution of the questions in order

for several topics to be explored at several stages in their life. Unlike other studies which have used questionnaires or surveys (eg Hals, 1990), the respondent is not limited or restricted to a certain response, but enables respondents to express fruitful accounts of their life experiences. During the sessions, semi-structured interviews also provided the opportunity to probe on essential topics which provided the interviewees the opportunities to further elaborate on their initial responses.

The questions revolved around 3 main themes: the participants feelings about having a visual impairment, more precisely, being legally blind; the experiences and tribulations they encountered in different areas of their life, for instance the private sphere consists of the family, romantic, work, and public relationships. And thirdly, the coping mechanisms developed at various stages of their life experiences: - onset of blindness/ positive and negative experiences with: family, school, intimacy, work, and public will be discussed. All their responses combine to show the varied lives lived, the problems they have faced, how they feel, and how they have coped with daily adversities at different levels in their life. These are their stories which they hope will help others in different ways. Certainly, there is no one pattern, despite the commonality of the impairment.

Eleven of the interviews took place in the city of Montreal in the summer and fall of 2002. Nine of the respondents agreed to a face to face interview. Three of my respondents agreed to telephone interviews in order to avoid traveling. Before each session began, the nature and objectives of the research study were carefully explained to each respondent, after which each person either agreed or disagreed to consent. Participants were also reminded that at any time they had the opportunity to opt out from

the interview without having any consequences happen to them. At the time of consent, each respondent was assured of anonymity and was asked to choose a pseudonym.

As a researcher, I acknowledged the fact that for some participants it may be hard to reveal information about their lives. Discussions may have provoked sensitive issues to arise which may have been disturbing. As a researcher, and interviewer, I respected the confidentiality boundary, and assured my participants that I was not in any way there to judge or ridicule them. They were also reassured that they would not be rushed in any way to terminate the interview.

The interviews were conducted at a convenient location chosen by the respondents. This decision was made since some participants may have not felt comfortable traveling independently to an unfamiliar location. The interviews averaged one and half hours in length and were all conducted in one session. Each tape recorded session was transcribed verbatim and consistent with qualitative research and thoroughly reviewed for common and uncommon patterns, themes, and topics.

My respondents were extremely generous with their time and were very amenable to share their most invaluable recollections of diverse life experiences. All of them were appreciative of the quality of research I was conducting. Many mentioned that the intention of this research sought to listen to the voices that experience the daily life routines of living with blindness. For others, revealing salient issues became 'talk therapy.' Sharing some of their most personal and disheartening life moments became a way of giving much thought to issues that they had previously never concerned themselves with. Most of my respondents asked me what had drawn me into this line of research. They

were also grateful that I had decided to devote my efforts into researching something I so strongly believe in, and that is, give voice to those who so hardly have the opportunity to speak of their life stories.

I found this experience to be immeasurably informing, illuminating and rewarding. Their stories of endurance, optimism, and certainty, are tremendously powerful and moving. In spite of the adversities they have faced in the past, they all have developed ways of overcoming them.

Methodological Limitations

I do not claim to have a random or representative sample of the population studied. The intention of this research was to generate ideas for future research on the social aspects of people with legal blindness. The results elicited are based upon a non-representative and non-random sample consisting of a small number of persons, and thus, the conclusions drawn from this research cannot be generalized to the larger population of persons with legal blindness. Hence, this study should be regarded as exploratory, and the objective is merely to provide a brief overview of the personal realities of legal blindness and how people develop various coping skills at different stages. I listened to a small number of people from whom I was able to gain as much information as possible with regards to the social dimensions of people living with legal blindness.

I recommend that researchers explore this magnitude allowing people to take a standpoint from where they are and start there as the beginning of their learning. Regarding this sample, there should be more studies using larger samples. Due to the limited amount of sociological research on people with legal blindness, future studies need

to be conducted utilizing larger samples. I also recommend that other researchers explore this under-studied and often ignored domain.

In addition to describing the discrimination faced by the legally blind, my research will argue that this population have learned to develop various coping mechanisms in order to deal with the expected and unexpected challenges. This study is undertaken with the viewpoint that the legally blind represent a disenfranchised population whose voices have not been adequately recounted. Despite their successes, they are constantly seen as a minority population who are helpless, and are often seen to receive unequal treatment.

In the following five chapters, the respondents take us through several different life experiences. Uniquely, they share detailed accounts of the most intimate events in their life. Some more difficult than others, share their tribulations, and ultimately, successes. We begin with chapter four which discusses the initial reactions towards loss of sight.

CHAPTER 4

“WHY ME?” REACTIONS TO THE LOSS OF SIGHT

The powerful role that vision plays in everyday life may often never be fully appreciated until it is compromised or lost. The idea that blindness is worse than death is expressed by a chorus in Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, “for thou wert better dead than living blind” (Moneback:1973). Blindness is also the punishment wreaked on King Lear, as worse than death. The extent to which a person can independently perform the activities of daily living, is for the most part, related to an ability to see and interact with the environment.

This chapter documents the feelings associated with the sudden experience of losing vision. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the respondents’ feelings at the onset of their vision loss. We must keep in mind that “emotional reactions to blindness are highly individual” (Rusalem, 1973:68).

Even though my respondents lost their vision at different periods in their life, (early versus later onset in life), the majority of them shared the same concerns. While my respondents shared their detailed accounts, three imperative issues become portentous in this chapter. First, all respondents agree that their level of independence was their first initial concern at the onset of blindness. For instance, traveling independently became a major concern for all of my respondents. They perceived that their condition would hinder their life opportunities.

Second, half of the respondents were concerned with how their physical

attractiveness appeared to others. And third, a few of my respondents were atypical, accepted and embraced their initial loss of blindness, for reasons which will be discussed below.

This chapter also highlights the personal feelings and concerns associated with complete loss of vision, and indicates that the experience of blindness is both a physical and a psychological phenomenon. The experience of blindness can be described in terms of an interaction among two elements, the needs and desires of an individual with little or no vision, and the physical and social environment of an individual.

'Angry as Hell': Blindness and Dependence

The limitation in mobility presents itself as a negative experience for virtually all individuals who are blind. At the sudden or gradual experiences of losing sight, the blind person cannot move about as quickly, as securely, and easily as their seeing friends (Lowenfeld, 1975:173). The need for taking independent responsibility for their own productivity becomes an essential component in self-acceptance and self-esteem. The way they feel about themselves certainly influences the way they are able to perform. In turn, the way they feel about their performance influences the way others perceive them. Lastly, the way others perceive them impacts on the way they feel about themselves. All of my respondents suggest that impact of blindness must be understood from the perspective of the required adaptations in lifestyle that result directly from the physiological loss of vision in and of itself, whether this loss be partial or total.

It is difficult to define the nature of the impact, the extent of the impact, and the source of the impact. The more direct effects of impaired vision, the more socially

determined consequences there will be that blindness impinges upon, or alters the lifestyle of an individual meeting the practical day to day demands of living (Tuttle, 1984).

Although my respondents experienced vision loss at different stages in their life, there was a commonality in their first immediate reaction to their loss of sight. They became predominantly concerned with their level of independence.

The sample members responses traversed from a whole range of emotional reactions from feelings of 'helplessness,' to 'depressed,' to 'devastated,' to 'angry.' Other respondents were 'shocked,' while others became 'petrified' and 'afraid of being alone' became a main ordeal in their life. For one participant, the concern became precedent as he became primarily distressed about being able to take care of his wife. He admits, "it was going to be the end of my life," and he remembers, "at first I just wanted to die."

The respondents were quick to point out that these issues were first realized as inconveniences and excessively distracting to their lives. Feelings of helplessness became constant standards of measuring the level of one's independence and productivity. Consciously aware of these emotions resulted in decoding life as futility, frailty and failing. These personal feelings helped maintain negative appraisals of their capacity to define their sense of worthiness and ability to be constructive. This next section will group similar responses to the same category.

Helen and Valerie shared similar feelings of helplessness when they first lost all of their vision. They were overwhelmed with concern over their level of independence. Feelings of helplessness also triggered feelings of being 'guilty' and 'hopeless.' And for Valerie, feelings of helplessness reverted to feelings of being a child. For her, life couldn't

get any worse, “life just sucked.” Both their experiences are elaborated in the following.

My overall concern had to do with my future, and my level of independence. What was I do to about traveling? About reading? A trip to the library was no longer going to be a simple task, and what about my job, and writing my book reviews? ... I could no longer drive. I also first felt like people were pitying me. I felt helpless, and hopeless all at the same time. I first felt like my independence was now threatened for the rest of my life.

-Helen, 35 years-

I felt guilty. While the glaucoma was developing, I was given drops to put in my eyes. I didn't do it everyday. And when I lost my sight I blamed myself, how could I have been so stupid. When the doctor told me that I had no way of preventing my blindness, I insisted that it was my fault. I hated myself for a long time, until I realized that I did nothing to deserve this...I thought if I had only taken care of my eyes, I wouldn't have to be going through this hell at such a young age. I felt totally helpless, and lost. I needed help all the time, and couldn't do things for myself... I was only eleven when I lost most of my sight. As you very well know, as a child your level of independence is limited already. Your parents try to protect you from the outside world as much as they can. So at that age my level of independence was already limited. Having lost my sight just made things worse. I couldn't take it anymore. My mom now had to start giving me baths again. I couldn't even dress myself-up anymore. Life just sucked!

-Valerie 42 years-

Feelings of devastation and concern over one's own level of independence can be of primary consideration at the initial loss of blindness. Mark and Gloria admitted to being completely “devastated” at the initial onset of their blindness, and similarly shared concern over their level of independence. At first, Mark's initial reaction was that of devastation. He admits, “I was pretty devastated,” but also confesses, “I wanted to regain my independence.” He stressed that working back to independence means “you must start small.” Similarly, Gloria recalls, “I was devastated, completely loss, completely destroyed.” For Gloria, with devastation came a world of anger. She admits, “I was angry at the world.” She became worried of regaining her own independence. She explains, “I wanted to be the independent career woman I had always been, but for some reason, I

thought it might never happen.” Gloria also recalls, “I became afraid of being alone... petrified is the word.” She admits feeling this way because she didn’t want to face reality... it would be a whole new ball game.” Both Mark and Gloria detail their comments in the following.

When I went from being able to partially see to totally blind in January 1999, I was pretty devastated. At first, it was a little difficult because my eyesight began to fade away in April 91 after a surgery that I had. Through the years leading up to January 99 my vision faded gradually. Mind you when it happened I was still not prepared for it and I had to ask the Montreal Association for the Blind to help me function better. I wanted to regain my independence and I knew that this was the only way to do it... At first, anything small became a challenge. Eventually, like anything, you must start small and work your way to bigger things... what bothered me most was knowing that I couldn’t read my mail and find the music that I wanted to listen to, or choose the right clothes to wear when I was alone, or help the children with their homework, and mostly not being able to go out by myself anymore to go shopping. And of course, not being able to do my own banking. Knowing that I couldn’t do these things just made things look even worse.
-Mark 45 years-

I was 27, when I lost all of my sight. In the beginning, I was devastated, completely lost, completely destroyed. There was no other reason to live. I felt different, and hated waking up in the morning knowing that I wouldn’t be able to face a world that I could once see. Even though I knew it was coming, I still had that hope that it wouldn’t happen. I was angry at the world. I mean it’s like I didn’t complain about not being able to see perfectly before. God knows I couldn’t see like everyone else before, and it’s like he was taking any remaining vision that was left... I was worried about taking care of myself. Since my late teens I had always lived on my own. Even though I didn’t have all of my vision, I could still see a fair amount, and that helped me do what I had to do. It wasn’t always easy, but I was okay... But when the doctors told me that eventually I was going to lose all remaining sight, I became very scared. Petrified is the word. I just can’t describe what it first did to me. I was scared to get out of bed, because I knew when I did, it would be a whole new ball game. I became afraid of being alone, because I didn’t want to face reality. I was angry that I couldn’t find my sock’s when I really needed to find them. I was angry about not being able to make a cup of coffee in the middle of the night if I really wanted to... I hated to think that I lost any remaining independence. I wanted to be the independent career woman I had always been, but for some reason, I thought it might never happen again, and that scared me.
-Gloria 39 years-

Depression may be a common factor that some individuals experience at the onset

or gradual loss of sight. In Patrick's case, depression became the center of his life, and contributed to other negative feelings such as helplessness. Fortunately, the depression became key to helping him gain the determination he needed to regain his independence. He details his explanation in the following.

After losing my vision it was very depressing. I spent most of my time crying, even though I knew it was coming. As time would past, I had no choice but to just move on. You know that it was the most depressing summer of my life in 1994, it was actually on July 4th, independence day. That was ironic, because it was the first day in my life when I felt so helpless. It was like I had lost my freedom to live. So in the middle of the summer when I could have enjoyed life, you know, go out and play outside, instead I was in the hospital for a couple of weeks. I was angry as hell. When I think about how my eye bleed this makes me even more mad. After the surgery, I was brought to another doctor, to see what another doctor could do about it, after the damage had already been done. He said that the previous doctor should have not put me entirely to sleep during the surgery. The worst thing was having to leave regular high-school. I remember crying my eyes out again! I was losing my teenage life. I wanted to meet other teenage kids and hang out with them too... I guess you could say I was depressed for many, many years, but I still had determination, I was ready to move on and improve on things.

-Patrick 18 years-

In the above, we have learned that most of the respondents were especially concerned over the loss of independence as a result of losing their sight. Unlike most of the respondents, Bailey first became significantly distressed over the inability to care for his ill wife. He became primarily worried over losing his independence only because he thought it would unable him to care for his spouse. This concern took precedence over the distress of re-mastering life skills in order to regain independence. As he recalls, "My first concern was how I was going to take care of my wife, if I couldn't take care of myself..." Bailey remembers that the struggle to regain ordinary life skills were motivated by his will to be strong for his wife, he admits, ... "at first I just wanted to die... my wife was the only thing in my life that kept me going. I knew that I had to be strong for her...". He recounts

this experience in the following.

I had an embolism of the brain, and it knocked out all of my vision completely and my optic nerves. I'm going to be honest with you, I thought if I was going to have no sight at all it was going to be the end of my life. I was in my early sixties and had been seeing all of my life. It was a sudden shock. I remember being rushed to the hospital one day, and waking up the next morning unable to see. At first it was hard to believe. I kept thinking, I must be really, really tired and if I get some rest it will come back. I got to tell you I spent weeks in bed hoping that when I would wake up, I would be able to see again. But that never happened... Immediately I was concerned with my independence. I've always taken care of everything, especially my wife. Over the last 10 years she's been very ill, and I was the only one who could take care of her. That's one of the reasons why I took an early retirement, so that I could watch over her. My first concern was how I was going to take care of my wife, if I couldn't take care of myself... the frustration of not being able to read a sign or a notice was very difficult for me, but just taking a walk was another hazard. It was just hell to think about all this. I couldn't think straight anymore... At first I just wanted to die. My wife was the only thing in my life that kept me going. I knew that I had to be strong for her, but she was the one that made me realize that I had to be strong for myself first.

-Baily 62 years-

Members of the sample were primarily concerned with feeling of helplessness that contributed to feelings associated with value ownership and level of independence.

Feelings of guilt were primarily a concern for Valerie who recalls feeling guilty at the onset of her blindness thinking that she was at fault for her loss of vision. According to Parish (1988), "our self-imposed guilt is related to our own attitudes of helplessness toward the blindness" (32). The initial onset of loss of sight revolved around feelings of shock, depression, grief and resentment (Hudson, 1994:5000). Respondents describe feelings of losing their own sense of self-ordinary, normalcy, and competency. Their limitation in mobility presented itself as a negative experience.

All my respondents reported that these onset of negative feelings toward blindness affected their self-esteem. Some were more depressed than others and pessimistic about

their future. These ideas became a common pattern at the initial loss of vision. My findings correlate to those of Dodds (1993) who in his study similarly found that all these feelings become patterns at the initial loss of vision. Loss of self-esteem becomes negatively affected and can lead to anxiety and depression. Losing faith in their self-efficacy becomes an exigent factor in the emotional reactions toward blindness. Emotional reactions to the bereavement and to severe disabilities it appears is important in adjustment to disability (Hallenback, 1967; Dodds, 1993).

'I saw myself as ugly': Blindness and Aesthetics.

For some members of the sample, becoming blind left them feeling incomplete as a person. Having been able to see once in their lives they affirmed that loss of vision would now have them recognize their bodies as no longer efficient. Living with blindness implicated the feeling of living with a lack of aesthetics. Most of the respondents reported negative feelings of physical attractiveness at the beginning of their blindness. According to Rusalem (1972) one common experience as a result of blindness is the feeling of unattractiveness. The feeling of unattractiveness was especially prominent in those who developed blindness in childhood. They felt unable to form intimate relationships with other people. C.S. Ficheten's study, titled, "Reactions Toward dating Peers with A Visual Impairment," showed that visually impaired students have a harder time dating. Out of 350 non-disabled students, a high percentage indicated that "sighted young adults were seen as more likely to date non-disabled individuals than partially sighted or blind person" (1989:1). This illustrates the way in which a blind person, or sighted person for that matter feels about themselves. His or her self-esteem is greatly influenced by their own attitudes

of blindness and how other important people in their lives view it. These are the ways in which factors affect the self-concept and self-esteem.

In the following, the respondents share homogenous responses towards their own aesthetic view of themselves. Responses ranged from , “I saw myself as ugly,” to “feeling that I’m less than a whole human being,” to “I didn’t feel cute, handsome, or whatever girls say about guys they find attractive.” Verbal insults from the general public completed to make the process more difficult to endure. Some of these vocal taunts include, “poor girl, she’s going to be single all her life,” to “ you two are lesbians,” to “ugly clumsy bastard.” The sample members elaborate their feelings and experiences in greater detail in the following.

Let’s just talk about the challenge of getting into your teens! Being blind and a teenager wasn’t easy! Not everyone knows what that feels like! If you think being a teenager is hard, try being one who can’t see. I felt like I stood out from everyone else. Like my disability showed the most. I didn’t feel much about my physical appearance. Frankly, I didn’t think I had much physical appearance in the first place. At 19 I wasn’t involved in any romantic relationships. I didn’t have any guy friends I should say. I used to think it was because I must have been ugly to look at. My friends were mostly females. I felt unattractive... Of course, I had many crushes, and I didn’t think they would give me a second look.

-Gloria 39 years-

At age fourteen, I really had a negative reaction to my blindness, especially in secondary five, it was all about boys. I realized I was different. I saw myself as ugly, I didn’t even remember how I looked like. For me, I realized that it was never going to be possible for me to be with a boy because I thought of myself as ugly. Who would want to date a blind girl? This depressed me for two to three years.

-Valerie 42 years-

People think that just because I’m blind, that I can’t hear what they say. I hear what many say, and it’s what you expect to hear. ‘Nobody will ever marry her, they don’t want to take on that responsibility,’ or, ‘poor girl, she’s going to be single all her life unless she’s really lucky.’ High-school was very difficult because I was preoccupied with my identity. I didn’t feel beautiful. I didn’t know it. They weren’t accepting of me. High-

schools were crowded and I had a hard time walking around. The school was dark, so I would usually hold on to my friends, then I would hear, 'you two are lesbians.' I thought my chances of ever dating again were slim.

-Melissa 23 years-

I think the biggest thing for me is I'm still being torn with that feeling that I'm less than a whole human being. Particularly, when it comes to guys. I never felt pretty like the other girls in my class. And that's one of the reasons why I never really talked to the guys in my class, and still today I have a hard time with that too... I always thought of myself as ugly. My perception is because I feel there's something wrong with me, that people sort of see me in a way as a defect. Yeah, like there's something wrong with me.

-Mary 37 years-

It is clear from Mary's above response that some blind persons may feel 'less than a human being.' This can inadvertently contribute to negative feelings towards one's own aesthetics which may also cause someone to think of themselves as 'ugly' and perceive themselves as indifferent from everyone else around them. As a result, these feelings may provoke them to keep their social distance from interacting with members of the opposite sex.

In my social life as a teenager, things were very difficult. I didn't feel attractive or I should say, I lacked a lot of self confidence. I wasn't like the other boys who sounded like macho studs, you know, the kind teenage girls love to be around with. I often turned away from them because I thought they'd be grossed out if they got a real close up of my eyes. There was the hi and bye routine... once, in a nightclub, I fell flat on my face on the stage at the feet of a nude dancer. The crowd couldn't stop laughing. The lady was nice enough to help me up. I thought that was nice of her. But once she let me go, I heard her say, 'ugly clumsy bastard.'... I never felt like one of the guys, just because I really never felt like I could be.

-Kevin 41 years-

I really haven't had any real serious relationships with girls. I'm shy with them, and I guess it's because I really never had any girl friends, ya know. That would have been so helpful. I'm hoping this will change, because I want to get married and have a family of my own someday... One of the greatest challenges visually impaired people have is when you meet people for the very first time. You don't know how things are going because you don't see their facial expression. You don't see the first impression that you're getting from them. So it was challenging to meet new people, especially girls. I was afraid of

what they'd think of me, if they'd get a close up. I didn't feel like the regular kid on the block. I wasn't only thin and short, but I was also blind. It was just a bad time for me, I didn't feel cute, handsome, or whatever girls say about guys they find attractive. Some package, huh. This depressed me quite a bit and still does. But it is getting better.

-Patrick 18 years-

Unlike the others in the beginning, Nelson explains that his blindness did not play a negative impact in his relationship with women. However, later on he admits that it has negatively affected his relationship with the opposite sex. He became extremely worried about the way he looked as it bothered the way he appeared to women. In the following, Nelson elaborates on the above.

Since 1989, when I lost my sight, I dated four women. At first I guess you could say, that I didn't think much of myself. I sure as hell didn't see myself as the prince charming most girls were looking for. I would say that the relationships did not have anything to do or not to do with my blindness. In between these, there were women who could not handle the situation and would either tell me straight or make up the nice guy excuse. This in itself is not negative, but to say that my blindness had nothing to do with it would be false... At first, I was worried about the way I physically appeared to women. I knew my blindness was going to affect the way I looked, and that worried me all the time.

-Nelson 31 years-

Only three males, and four females of my sample members shared similar feelings about their lack of physical attractiveness at the initial loss of sight. The seven respondents indicated that their concern with their physical appearance played a role around whether they thought they would ever date. As Valerie recounts, "who would want to date a blind girl?" Only seven of the twelve respondents reported feelings of unattractiveness. The above female respondents all shared similar perceptions about how they viewed themselves as unsightly, and unbecoming of what they thought pretty girls were made of. As Alice points out, "I must have been ugly to look at." The 3 female respondents

commonly agreed that aesthetics would play a role in whether they would ever date. Hence, this preoccupation with physical identity, beauty, and concern with, “I didn’t feel beautiful,” encouraged them to believe it was at fault for their lack of involvement in intimate relationships. Interestingly, Mary saw herself as ‘not pretty,’ but also as having some sort of ‘defect’ making her feel like ‘less of a whole human being.’

Similar to the female respondents above, the males reported concerns with lack of self-confidence and physical attractiveness. For the male respondents, the issue of attractiveness is the reason for which they would endure dilemmas in searching for an intimate relationship. As Patrick recalls ... “I didn’t feel attractive, or should I say, I lacked a lot of self-confidence.” For one of the respondents, socializing with women presented as some sort of challenge as he expressed the concern of not being able to see their facial expressions when conversing with them. As Patrick explains, “ You don’t know how things are going because you don’t see their facial expression... so it was challenging to meet new people, especially girls... I was afraid of what they might think of me.” One respondent also disclosed that he believes that his blindness played a role in the duration of his intimate relationships. Nelson shares, “ In between these, there were women who could not handle the situation and would either tell me straight, or make up the nice guy excuse...this in itself is not negative, but to say that my blindness had nothing to do with it would be false.”

Unlike the female respondents, Patrick and Nelson did not let these negative feelings towards their self-image get in the way of pursuing, or wanting to pursue an intimate relationship with the opposite sex. For instance, although Nelson admitted that he

did not see himself as 'prince charming,' he nonetheless dated four women. Although Patrick has not been in any serious relationships, he is hoping this will change so that he can get married and raise a family some day. In sum, their negative feelings about their appearances have not prevented them from thinking they would never date and fall in love.

"I accept and embrace it": Blindness and Self.

Despite the feelings associated with loss of independence, some of my respondents perceived a sense of ownership and attachment to their visual impairment. Having learnt to be content with their physical differences, they regarded blindness as a part of their unique identity. Two respondents learnt to accept physical and social repercussions that come along with having a non-conventional appearance. According to Nelson and Gloria, blindness should not in any way determine what kind of life you should lead. Some of them did not see themselves as constituting a difference from the norm, but revealed that they scarcely saw their disability as indifferent, and feel not to distinguish themselves from others. Nelson recalls, "my first reaction was one of acceptance," while Gloria remembers, "my immediate reaction was what a relief." She knew that "life was all about adapting to change." For both of these individuals the visual impairment did not become an issue. Inevitably, both respondents knew that this life change would eventually lead to differences in their daily routines, with realizing they could adapt to these new changes because they chose to confront them.

Nelson and Gloria describe their own experiences in the acceptance of their visual impairment.

My first reaction was one of acceptance. At the time of my loss of sight, I was supposed

to start medical school. Since I was quite ill, I tried to go to cegep to continue some kind of studies. I had in my mind that blindness would not stop me from continuing my life. I have always said that humans are made to adapt to any situation... I would say that I do not cope with blindness because I accept and embrace it. I did at first and still do today. I keep in my mind that there are much worse fates in life and go on with my day. I still 'cope' with my blindness in the same way, but I have experience and maturity to help me as well as my positive outlook.

-Nelson 31 years-

My immediate reaction was what a relief, because I had been through a number of transitions and it was difficult getting through each level of the transitions. I was expecting it I guess, I knew where I was going to be. Of course, I wasn't thrilled about it, but, I don't know if I would feel differently from being able to see shadows, I guess you could say that before losing complete sight I had shadow vision, and I never found that was really helpful. So I knew it was coming, so I started taking mobility training, like learning how to use a white cane, and I also learned how to read braille. I wanted to continue with what I was doing. I didn't want to find myself depending on others anymore, so I was ready for it, and knew that life was all about adapting to change. It wasn't easy, but I knew it didn't change who I wanted to be. Things were going to get a bit harder, but I knew that I could handle it, because I chose to.

-Gloria 39 years-

Through the messages respondents have expressed, it is clear that at the initial onset of blindness one's identity is changed. There is no unique psychology of the blind, and no unique set of principles required to understand the patterns. We learned from Nelson that it was important for him to establish the realization that he was going to lose his sight because he didn't want this disability to prevent him from achieving his goals. Nelson vividly recalls, "I accept and embrace it... I keep in mind that there are much worse fates in life and go on with my day...I had in mind that blindness would not stop me from continuing my life."

Although Gloria was not thrilled about the transition at first, she describes the experience as one of 'relief.' She immediately began mobility training in order to readapt to life's changes in order to, as she calls it, "to continue with what I was doing." Gloria

helps us understand that accepting this transition encouraged her to find herself not wanting to depend on “others anymore.” Being “ready” for the transition may motivate some like Gloria in “adapting to change.” What’s important to distinguish is that she made a special effort of not letting her blindness get in her way of prospering. She states it best, “It wasn’t easy, but I knew that I could handle it, because I chose to.”

Concluding Remarks

The respondents have shown that there are certain personal and emotional first concerns they’ve had to deal with at the onset of their vision loss. It is clear that most of my respondents were absolutely ‘devastated’ at the initial loss of their sight. They experienced intense ‘anger’, deep ‘depression’ with long crying jags, and even ‘guilt’. Respondents recall being ‘...angry as hell,’ ‘...spent most of my time crying,’ ... and feelings of being ‘...completely destroyed’ and ‘...angry at world.’ While others became ‘helpless’ and at first ‘just wanted to die,’ some respondents became ‘...very scared, petrified is the word.’ Life became a new challenge engaging them in feeling a whole array of emotions.

Respondents expressed their visual impairment to be an inconvenience at times, but their overall fear was over the concern in their loss of independence. Realizing that their lifestyle would soon change became of a striking concern for them. For others, their loss of independence also triggered their concern for other members in their family. As Bailey mentioned in the above, ... “I’ve always taken care of everything, especially my wife.” Thus, worries about their inability to support dependents became of a primary concern for Bailey. For Bailey, and most of the respondents above, they had always by nature been independent. Their concern was primarily over how their blindness could

self-impose restrictions to carry on with their daily life routines. This concern heavily relied on the limiting factor to the extent to which experiential interaction with the environment is impoverished, thus inhibiting the blind person's ability to gather the greatest amount of alternative sensory possible. As my respondents expressed their concern, one could begin to understand how they analyzed, one by one, the perceived losses or inabilities. Feelings of distress and doubt were found common in more extreme instances where the emotional reactions were taken into more severe aspirations.

Seven of the respondents also expressed feelings of concern over their physical attractiveness. How they appeared to others now seemed of a greater concern than anything else ever experienced before. Now more than ever in their lives, some respondents were overly concerned with how they were physically perceived by others. Both males and females from the sample revealed that their lack of self-confidence negatively affected their self-concepts. These emotional factors are all inherent in and intrinsic in the suppressing effect on one's sense of competence and self-esteem. Some agreed that initially this response decreased their adaptation to the demands of life in a positive manner. This did not help in the respect and admiration they felt for themselves.

Finally, two of my respondents commonly shared how accepting they were at the initial onset of their blindness. Losing their sight did not discourage them from leading their own independent lifestyles as they once had. This new status only encouraged them to master their environment and feel more adequately competent to be the effective and independent person they had always been. Initially they did not perceive the process to be arduous and difficult, but as an act that would not constrain themselves to the

achievement of certain goals that would impede in their ability to adjust to the reality that tends to alter their aspirations and way of life.

In sum, this chapter, has reviewed the emotional implications of my respondent's initial reaction to blindness. At the initial loss of sight, it is clear through the respondents revelations, that most of them were absolutely devastated. They experienced intense feelings of depression with long crying jags, even guilt. It evident that they had experienced concern over the loss of independence and how it would influence their lifestyle. Concern over the inability to support independents became prominent. Other respondents felt unattractive, even ugly, and were even told they were ugly. This became a difficult time, even for those whose loss of sight had been gradual. There were only two individuals who were exceptions to these trends. Why they are so exceptional will become more clear in the following chapters.

The next chapter will provide in chronological detail about two areas in their life in which people reacted to their condition. The 'family' and 'school' environment will be thoroughly examined.

CHAPTER 5

FAMILY AND SCHOOL

This chapter documents the difficulties and hardships associated with blindness and how it can infiltrate every area of a personal and private life: family and school. This chapter particularly focuses on the respondents' feelings towards patterns of difficulties they experienced with their family and in their school environment. There will be an analysis of the family dynamics in the importance of establishing a harbor protecting them from the outside world of discrimination. In addition, an examination of the school years will demonstrate that as respondents stepped outside their sheltered homes, they were quick to discover that school was not the safe refuge against injustice. In this context, respondents will provide detailed accounts of experiences held in the family and school.

Family Dynamics

The family can play a dominant role in a child's immediate environment (Sroufe et al.: 1996). The immediate family provides children with a loving environment, hopefully which will stimulate language and developmental skills that foster them with opportunity to form social and cognitive skills necessary for the child's emotional growth. The emotional quality in these relationships can have far-reaching effects, influencing a child's curiosity, problem-solving, and interactions with the everyday world.

Three major themes emerged from my respondents: overprotectiveness, unsupportiveness, and acceptance. Almost all of the respondents agreed that the immediate family context served to provide them with a motivating force adapting them to

the world.

'We'll do it for you': Overprotectiveness

Most of my respondents recall their home environment as a safe shelter in which they described their immediate family members to be very supportive and accepting of their disability. Respondents reported that parents, siblings, and extended family members were for the most part very loving and accepting of them. Many of my interviewees felt that the immediate family context essentially was the one single force that encouraged them to understand their disability and to take full responsibility in taking charge of their own life. However, at the initial loss of their sight, some respondents thought that living at home was not always easy. Most parents became over-protective, and overly concerned with how they were going to deal with it. Many interviewees thought that this over-protectiveness often prevented them from developing an independent life-style. Some respondents, "couldn't stand it," while others thought their "parents were the worst." Other respondents recall, "it was especially difficult to cope with the pity of my parents," and this overprotectiveness "absolutely drove me mad." These experiences became especially difficult for those respondents who were still living at home with their immediate families.

The respondents discuss their experiences below.

When I think back to my family interactions, wow so many things come to mind. It was sort of hard for my parents to know what to do as they had absolutely no contact with the blind community in the past. They were very over-protective of me. It drove me crazy, you have no idea. They wanted to help me out by doing everything for me. I'm talking about like preparing my bath to tying my own shoelaces. They were always around me, I couldn't stand it. They wanted me to learn to do things on my own, but were constantly doing everything for me. I had to tell them to back off a little, and let me fall flat on my

face, if that's what was gonna get me to do things for myself... at first their help is all I needed and wanted, but then, it became annoying. My mobility trainer I guess, helped my parents understand what really needed to be done. I understand that they were trying to make my life easier, but they weren't helping me at all. I guess they needed to hear it from someone other than me. And that worked. Things started changing around the house... I was gradually becoming the independent teenage son they had always wanted.

It was a long process, but it eventually came along.
-Doug 19 years-

Well, since I knew it was coming I started taking mobility training, like learning braille, and using a white cane. I wanted to continue with what I was doing. I didn't want to find myself depending on others anymore... it was especially difficult to cope with the pity of my parents. They were so over-protective. They had this incredible emotional side, and that was very difficult to deal with too. I was ready to deal with what was coming, but what made it very difficult was the way my parents treated it. My parents were the worst! Sometimes I felt I was being tested by them. My mom would often come into my room and turn the light on, and then I wouldn't turn the light off cuz I didn't realize it was on. She did these sort of things to prove to herself that I couldn't take care of myself. This bothered me and often made me feel incompetent. When I was living at home with them, I felt like I had to always deal with their emotions and mine. That was all too much to take at once... I know they had the best intentions but enough is enough. I felt like they were always putting their fingers to control my environment making it all the more difficult... My mom, she especially prevented me from going out on my own. I couldn't take the bus, or walk over to the corner store. I wasn't able to go out with friends because she thought they wouldn't watch over me the way she would. I never confronted my parents about how they made me feel, like some helpless little girl. I shut down with them, and didn't become very communicative. I felt I had reached an age where you're allowed to be your own person, come on, I was 19. I didn't feel they gave me the opportunity to be my own person. I felt they set their ways to meet the expectations of what they thought was appropriate for a blind person, and I just didn't see it that way.

-Gloria 39 years-

In Gloria's case, it is obvious that she experienced a great deal of emotional turmoil with her parents. Gloria recalls many other factors other than her parent's protectiveness that prevented her from working towards regaining her independence. As mentioned above, Gloria indicates that she did not appreciate the way her parents often tested her limits. For instance, they would leave the light on hoping that she would forget to turn it off. This would give them power to confront her about the inability to function

as a blind person. Their pity and constant controlling demands made her feel incompetent and continually challenged her into feeling helpless. Unfortunately it also became the motivating force for the breakdown in communication with her parents. Although her parents believed they were doing what they thought was right for their own daughter, they were doing the opposite where from Gloria's point of view, they didn't give the opportunity to be her own person.

I will start with the negative experiences in my family. Really, the only negative experiences I had with my family had to do with their over protectiveness. In the beginning, this absolutely drove me mad. My dad did not want me working in the kitchen, or going out on my own for the first few years after becoming blind. He didn't even want me going back to school in science, he thought it would be better for someone like me to do better in philosophy or religion. It took a while for him to understand that things were going to get a bit harder for me to do, but with time, I was going to do them. This just gave me the strength to fight, and in then end, I did what I wanted.

-Nelson 31 years-

When it happened, everyone tried to help me do everything. In the beginning, I hated asking for help given my characteristics and personality. I had always been outgoing and social. And for some reason, after asking for help made me feel the reverse. During my whole life I was the one helping others and now I had to ask them to help me...My family insisted that I live with them, even though I had been living on my own for quite some time. I accepted at first but I imagine this was the worst mistake at the time. I was never alone accept when I had to go to the bathroom. They insisted always that I ask. I became dependent on this lifestyle for a while, and then realized that it wasn't for me. I know my parents, and brothers and sisters were all trying to help, but it really wasn't working...There were sentimental aspects to the whole thing as well. I was never going to see my nephews grow up, and the worst thing, was that they didn't want them to stay alone with me even after I had been living on my own. This hurt me because I knew they did not trust me... I guess you could say it was difficult to deal with my family's reactions and confrontations in the beginning. It was frustrating to deal with it, but it helped me realize eventually that they were just overall concerned about my whole situation and needed some time to deal with it.

-Helen 35 years-

There were a few difficult challenges that I had to deal with my family in the beginning stages of when I first lost my sight. With my family, it was extremely difficult because they wanted to do things for me that I wanted to do for myself and they were always

breathing down my neck at every minute. The biggest challenge was trying to make them understand that I could do things on my own. It may have taken a little more time and it may be done differently but the result is still the same, and at times even better. It bothered me when my wife wouldn't let me help the kids with their homework. This made me very angry just because you're blind doesn't mean your incompetent. I hadn't lost my mathematical or science skills. It took some time before she could understand that there were many things I could still do being blind. As I was learning to turn my life around, she did too, and things started getting better between us. She began to understand that I wasn't totally dysfunctional.

-Mark 45 years-

Through Nelson, Helen, and Mark's responses, we come to understand that sometimes family members' overwhelming concern may impede over's the blind person's challenge to meet their own expectations. All three of them understood that it was going to take some time before family members could understand that blindness was not going to take away their chances of living a functional life. Most importantly all three respondents realized that their family's concern was taking away from them the to strive for regaining one's own life skills. For some like Nelson, this overwhelming concern gave him as he recalls, "the strength to fight, and in the end, I did what I wanted."

According to Agarwal and Piplani (1990) social work literature contains numerous references to the subject verifying that common observations that the family's response to the blind child is a crucial determinant of the rehabilitation process (336). As some of the respondent's revealed, it became difficult for them to become independent in the socio-context of family. The constant effort to minimize their initiative to take on new tasks in order to regain independent life skills became continual and impeded on their ability to progress toward life goals.

From the respondents above accounts, we have learned that families who are

overprotective, highly anxious, or who encourage dependant behaviour may prevent the total rehabilitation process from operating successfully. Thomas Large's (1982) study on, "The Effects of Attitudes Upon the Blind," showed how significant common experiences emerged among his subjects and the respondents from my sample. First, his results report that all participants revealed being deeply influenced in their adjustment by the attitude of at least one family member. This seemed to be as powerful an attitudinal influence for those who lost their sight in middle age as it was for those whose blindness occurred in childhood or in adolescence. Second, similarly to my own results, Large's study showed the power of relative's attitudes upon subjects seemed equally strong regardless of whether it was felt as positive or negative. In other words, some subjects seem to have been as discouraged by a family member's negative attitude as others were encouraged by a family member's positive attitude.

In light, some of Goffman's theoretical framework applies to the above finding. As previously discussed, Goffman contends that when a stranger comes into presence, their first appearances allows us to categorize his attributes, what you would call, the respondents 'social identity'. Goffman's framework ties well into saying that the respondents' immediate family learned to lean on these anticipations and transform them into 'normative expectations' that soon in itself, turned into demands (1963:3). And since the respondents did not meet the expectations or demands of the parents, they were reduced from their minds as 'whole persons' limiting their appearance as normal beings with their own justification for living.

In Goffman's justification, the parents of the respondents regarded them as less

of a person because of their disability which in turn infringed upon the attitudes of their children as 'helpless' because their 'visual characteristics' set them apart from the standard norm of what is considered a human being. Unfortunately, as Goffman points out in his theory, this limits their opportunities in the outside world, and conditions them to unthinkingly realize the root cause of their alienation. Therefore, parental assumptions about their child's incapacibilities of managing on their own creates a source of validation that evokes the respondents to unthinkingly view how their vision loss can reduce their life chances.

"They were the worst:" Lack of Parental Support

One of my respondents explained how her parents made her feel towards the entire process of becoming blind. Mary describes the experience as one that negatively reinforced the way in which she has chosen certain options in her life in the past, today, and in the near future. She explains it best in the following.

My parents they were the worst. When you get into the whole family dynamics, there's so much behind it ya know. I think because I came from a family where both my parents were visually impaired, and a stepsister that was visually impaired, I was encouraged to go out, and do the best I could, and they often said, 'we want you to do the best you could,' but they never encouraged me, or told me I could do whatever I wanted. We never talked about what do you want to do when you get older? And that's why I don't have that drive anymore. I think that my parents again with their visual impairment had their own skeletons to deal with. I remember many years ago my dad saying, and if he were alive he'd be in his 70's. He was always very isolated from the world. When he lost his vision, he worked in a sheltered workshop, he made brooms and stuff, a very different lifestyle from what he used to do when he could see. I wouldn't do what he did because I personally think that I could do a lot more than what he thought he could do, and I know that's what he thought. He thought if you were blind you had your place, you had your shell, and that's where you should be. I think that in some ways drummed into me. I was never encouraged, but never discouraged. I remember my mom saying to me when I was a little girl, you know Mary, you won't have a lot of friends because you're visually impaired, and when I think about it now, that really sucks. It's a terrible thing to tell

somebody, especially a child. I think she told me because she wanted to protect me. And I'm very lucky because I do have a lot of friends. Some are visually impaired and some aren't. So that doesn't hold true, I've been knowing that for all these years. In high-school, I'd make a friend, and have them for a while, ya know. I'd try to fit in, or didn't try to hard to fit in. They didn't know when, or how to say the right things! I guess you could say I did resent them for quite sometime, and I believe I haven't coped well with blindness because of them... I don't really know what I want to do in the future but one thing's for sure, I should look for another job. It's very uncomfortable there, but it's something I know I don't want to do for the rest of my life. Don't get me wrong, I love working with children who have multiple handicaps. It's really a job I didn't have to look hard for and get doors slammed on my face. I'm afraid to try, and that's one of the things that doesn't help me move on. I know this has to do with the way my parent's raised me. They never told me I could be whatever I wanted. They always told me that my blindness would take many of my life chances away, like it would stop me from doing so much. I guess you could say that's why they were so damn overprotective that it drove me insane. They made me hate my blindness for many years. They never gave me that extra push, and told me to go for it, like other parents say to their kids. Over the years, messages like those prevented me from doing many things in my life I regret not doing. When I think about it, I hate them for doing that to me, but you know, life goes on, and things should change. I'd like to work in fund-raising, or in something social. I know it's something I will eventually look into, but I wouldn't be able to tell you when.

-Mary 37 years-

In Mary's case, home was not a supportive haven where she was encouraged to strive and become independent. In addition, she also wasn't in search for opportunities beyond her ordinary capabilities. Unfortunately, the lack of support Mary received from her parents is what she understands took away from her ability to pursue careers of better interest. Today, Mary understands what initially has affected many of the decisions she has made in the course of her life. Her parents' continual negative attitude towards blindness significantly played a role in helping her determine what kind of person she wanted to be. Their constant lack of support pushed her aside from the rest of the world and made her resent and hate her blindness for many years.

According to Agarwal and Piplani (1990), the family seems to be a major source

of interpersonal influences that affect what blindness comes to mean to the person, what he or she does with it, and the eventual outcome of the plans made jointly with the individual. In 1984, Moore conducted a study on blind and visually impaired children to assess the family attitude during rehabilitation process. The result showed that clients who were competitive during the employment arena reported more positive family attitudes, as those who reported negative parental and familial attitudes.

Hence within the family, both parents and siblings are powerful influences on the child. Parents characterized by warmth, support and reasoning approaches has consistently been associated with positive child characteristics including cooperativeness, effective coping, and strongly internalized norms, and a sense of personal responsibility and high-levels of moral reasoning (Sroufe et al., 1996:472). Relationships with parents markedly influences the choices blind children re-adapt to the opportunities made available for them. It is quite evident that the power of a relative's attitude upon a blind person is equally strong regardless of whether it was felt as positive or negative.

“Do it yourself, you could do it”: Family support and acceptance

In contrast, two of the respondents had very positive experiences within their family niche. The family circle provided them with acceptance, and encouraged them with the opportunity to come out and learn the necessary independent life skills they needed. The family's positive attitude about acquiring the necessary life skills helped them achieve the goals they set out for themselves. In essence, it contributed to the relearning of their life skills that eventually would less complicate their lives and improve their standard daily life routines. The following two respondents attribute their adjusted life learned skills to

their family's acceptance of their disability. Their immediate families' understanding and acceptance motivated them to participate in life and give it a second chance.

With the help of my dad's sisters and uncles, they saved some money for us in hope that our life would be better here because back in my country life was harder, it's a third world country, and life was not easy for most families, especially families with disabled children. My parents also wanted to give me a better life so we came here, and you know and we were thinking we would appreciate the medicine and technology here better. There was a lot more here that could help us with my future. Back home they didn't have places like the MAB. You were given mobility lessons by a trained nurse for a couple of weeks and that's it. There's no possible way you could learn braille in 2 weeks. My parents were willing to give up everything to help me deal with the new change that happened in my life...My parents convinced me for a while that it would be better for me to go to that specialized school to get some training, so that when I return to regular high-school, I would be able to survive much better. From the start they've always accepted my blindness. I knew they weren't so happy about it, but they were convinced that I could start from scratch. They knew I would be able to survive... once I started my mobility training, they were always encouraging me to do things for myself. My dad would especially say, 'do it yourself, you could do it!' At times I thought they were being mean and didn't want to bother with me anymore. But now I understand what they were doing all along. They were trying to make me stronger, and that helped me a lot. Because of them I could pursue an education. I can't believe it, I've made it this far. My parents were the best, and still are. They've always kept me busy. And even today I'm a busy person. I'm involved with a few organizations, I go to school full-time, and work too... I always tried my best because my parents always told me I could do anything. They always told me, 'it doesn't matter whether you have a disability or not.' They made me understand that.

-Patrick 18 years-

The challenge of not being able to refit yourself in to your family was the biggest worry for me. The biggest shock is not only for the person who loses their sight, but also to the family members who have now to deal with a blind person who they have never dealt with before, so you know this is all very important...interacting with my family when this first happened. It took them a very long time, not all of them, I might say to get used to it at first. We talked about it a lot to realize that I was blind and was never going to see again. We talked a lot about it, and worked together to make things better for me. At first they didn't think I was taking it bad because I was always one to cope with many things before. My wife and children were very accepting from the start. I have to say that if it wasn't for them I don't think I'd be able to be where I am today. They've helped me so much, and have been very supportive. They accepted my new life from the start. They told me things were not gonna get easy, but with time, they were gonna get better...Their support made me want to become active again, and want to get back into life. I knew it

wasn't going to be easy, but at least I knew that they were there for me. They never made me feel incompetent, or like a burden, they're the best.

-Bailey 62 years-

In the above, Patrick and Bailey provided us with meaningful and detailed accounts of how acceptance and positive feedback from their immediate families encouraged them to develop the self-confidence and motivation to successfully learn new life-skills that would help them adjust to their vision loss. Support and positive relations among the immediate family zone offered Patrick and Bailey feelings of self-affirmation and gave them the courage to express their needs and desires to fulfill life endeavors.

Patrick's parents were accepting from the start since they were expecting it, and as such, this gave them more time to deal with it. Comments like, 'do it yourself, you could do it,' gave him the strength to persevere. Patrick understood that these comments were there to make him a stronger person. And of course, though at the time he may have thought his parents were being mean, he now understands the meaning behind their words. Bailey, similarly explains that although his family accepted it from the start, they needed a long time to deal with this sudden change in their lives. Talking it through with his family helped everyone understand what they could do to make things easier.

In sum, both Patrick and Bailey's experiences help us understand that positive family acceptance and support become vital in the rehabilitation process of the blind. Thomas Large (1982) conducted a study in order to help determine the impact of negative and positive attitudes on the blind person's rehabilitation process. An important question he tried to unveil was why do some people make positive use of the attitudes of others, while other blind people do not. Some of the results discussed the legally blind person's

views of the effect that others' had upon their adjustment. Significant common experiences emerged among the subjects. According to Large (1980), all subjects reported being deeply influenced in their adjustment by the attitude of at least one family member. This seemed to be as powerful an attitudinal influence for those who lost their sight in middle age as it was for those whose blindness occurred in childhood or in adolescence. Second, the power of a relative's attitude upon subjects seemed equally strong regardless of whether it was felt as positive or negative. In other words, some subjects seemed to have been discouraged by a family member's negative attitude as others were encouraged by a family member's positive attitude.

Similarly, it is quite clear from my own research that the kind of support my respondents received from their immediate families played a portentous role in the manner which they responded to their own experience of vision loss. According to 6 of my respondents, it becomes quite evident that the immediate family can sometimes become over-protective and this may prevent them from becoming independent. We listened to respondents reveal, "they were over-protective of me," and how "they were so overprotective." These feelings of over-protectiveness sometimes made respondents feel like "they were being tested," or made them feel "incompetent," and as Gloria suggests, "I didn't feel they gave me the opportunity to be my own person."

Only one of the respondents disclosed negative feelings about the relationship she maintained with her parents throughout the entire process of her blindness. Mary explained that even though she was told, "we want you to do the best you could", she admits to never being 'encouraged' by her family As Mary states, "I was never

encouraged, but never discouraged.” Mary recalls her parents telling her that blindness would take many of her “life chances away.” As a result, these negative attitudes toward blindness have not helped her “move on” to better opportunities. As she states it, “ it would stop me from doing so much.” This unsupportive haven has contributed to the lack of self-confidence Mary has had throughout her life in her ability to strive for new accomplishments and goals in the future.

From another point of view, it is quite evident how parent’s negative or positive attitude toward blindness can inadvertently influence the life choices my respondents have made in their life. It is also clear that my interviewees’ perception of how their parents viewed and accepted their blindness has had an incredible positive force on their willingness to feel equally strong in their ability to strive in life’s opportunities. Endless support from immediate families contributed to their willingness to succeed in life’s endeavors. As Patrick stated, “I always tried my best because my parents always told me I could do anything.” Immediate family support served as a positive motivating factor. Respondents ranged from, “they were the best,” versus “they were the worst.”

For the respondents, the world outside their home was not very accepting of their blindness. Most of them agreed that the family was a safer sanctuary than the world beyond their homes.

Elementary School: Childhood Victimization

As some of my respondents departed from their sheltered homes, they had discovered a whole new world imbued with cruelty and pain. They never would have thought the world beyond their home could be filled with such violence and pain. Five of

the twelve respondents experienced loss of sight during their childhood years, while three of my respondents experienced loss of sight during their adolescent years. All eight of the respondents recall these years to be filled with taunting remarks from other children, as well, from certain school teachers. Sometimes they were teased, and endured name-calling as well as different types of physical forms of victimization. Completing class assignments and following teachers' instructions were especially difficult for them due to their low-vision and inability to view the blackboard. Being physically different from others sometimes inflicted loneliness and detachment from other class members. Most of the respondents recall their early and adolescent school years to be unhappy ones. I begin by illustrating the experiences of respondents during the elementary school years.

'Special guest' to 'Outcast': Name-calling and teasing

"I hated school, I had lots of problems with other kids who thought it was funny to give me problems," explains Kevin. The impiety expressed indicates that victimization toward people with blindness begins at an early age. Three respondents related times when they were targets for name-calling and teasing, from 'special guest to outcast' these respondents were victims of derogatory terms which children called them.

When I was a kid growing up, and when I was in elementary school, I eventually was brought to the MAB for schooling because at the time the school was for kids who were visually impaired. It wasn't a school for kids who were multi-handicapped. There were a few people who had other intellectual and physical disabilities, but it mainly was for the visually impaired who would go there. So there, in that kind of environment it was fine. I didn't feel any different because I was surrounded with others who were like me. Then they decided to partially integrate me into a 'sighted school' for lack of a better term. So in grade 5 they started to integrate me into a sighted school, as I call it. So by grade 6, I would be totally integrated. I'd be going there all the time. And that was oh my God, the most awful experience. So again, until grade 5 it didn't occur to me that I was different, well I can't say it didn't occur to me that I was different, because I was sort of. But again

that if you're with kids who are the same as you, you know you're accepted, if you're not accepted it's not because you're mean, it's because they don't like you for whatever reason. Everybody has problems. And my best-friend at home was someone who again was sighted, and at the time, she didn't seem to have any problems with my blindness... anyway, I started to be partially integrated in grade 5, and when I got there, it sort of like the kids saw me as this 'special guest'. They were excited to see me. Everyone wanted to, well may not everybody, but a lot of kids wanted to be my friend, and wanted to help me at first. But when I went the next year full-time, it was a different story. All of a sudden it wasn't like wow there's Mary, it was more like, 'oh there's the kid who's blind.' I became very foreign and new to them. And it really became a hell of a lot of shit for me. I think for a lot reasons. Kids could be rotten and cruel, not all of them, but enough of them, so I really didn't have any friends, and I really didn't. And I think being thrown into that situation at that age didn't help either. I really didn't know how to handle it. So you come from being the special guest, the one that everyone pays attention to, to the one that no one wants to be bothered with, or the one that no one wants to bother with. They begin to see you as indifferent, and start to pick on you. I was the outcast. So that was really, really hard, and awful to have no friends especially at a young age. They'd call me names like 'fat-blind girl.' That particular year was awful, well actually high-school wasn't a whole lot better. Let's just say, if you think things were bad in elementary school, the teasing and name-calling got worse in high-school. I honestly don't know how I made it. I mean, I just remember staying home a lot. I'd fake being sick. Whether my mom bought into it or not that's another story, but I remember staying home a lot. A lot. Probably a quarter of the whole year I lived at home. I just couldn't take the name-calling and teasing anymore. The kids made me feel stupid, ugly, and worthless, like I shouldn't be allowed where they were. My parents knew! I talked to my mom, I know they knew what I was going through. I know they did... In grade six they picked on me, but in grade 7 it was a whole different story.

-Mary 37 years-

I had children think it was funny to call me Stevie Wonder Jr. or blind-stick man. When one started, they got the whole class going. It was difficult because in my elementary school I was the only one who was blind. I had a little bit of vision during those years and could tell how some of the kids would look at me. I felt like I was being gazed at all the time. I felt like my classmates were always watching me, you know, waiting to see me mess up on something...I remember there was this one guy who kept calling me the 'one eye monster.' These were difficult times for me, and I don't really talk about it, cuz I don't want to remember it.

-Kevin 41 years-

Kids were quite cruel and not very accepting of me. They made fun of me a lot. They called me 'black eyes,' 'blind witch,' 'blind girl' among other names I hated. It was horrible. I wasn't able to defend myself cuz I wouldn't know what to say to them. I was also afraid how they might react. I was too young then, but once I got into high-school I

spoke up. I had just about enough.
-Melissa 23 years-

It is quite evident from the respondents feelings in the above, that name calling and teasing helped them feel tormented, neglected and abused by other classmates. For Mary, she recalls it being a 'hell of a lot of shit' to handle all at the same time. The children's verbal taunts made her feel, 'stupid,' 'ugly' and 'worthless.' Verbal taunts could also not want to make people go back in time to remember how they were once teased and ridiculed by classmates. As Kevin mentioned in the above, "these were difficult times for me, and I don't really talk about it, cuz I don't want to remember it." In other cases, it might be difficult to defend oneself while being made fun of, especially at the elementary stage. As Melissa mentioned earlier, "I was afraid how they might react. I was too young then... ."

'Spat on,' 'Trip you on purpose': Physical Violence

In other cases, the respondents were physically victimized by their classmates. Objects were thrown at them, while others were spat, physically punched and seriously ridiculed. As Kevin vividly recalls, "it was not rare to have a mushy banana or such thrown at me so it would hit me in the face." These acts of degradation and humiliation often led the respondents during childhood years to self-isolate themselves from their classmates, and deal with their feelings of anger and frustration alone. These experiences became reasons for not wanting to go to school.

Yeah, I got beat up, more than beat up. I got spit on a lot. It was really gross. Actually, for quite a few years, I got spit on pretty bad. Kids could be truly awful. And I think because I'm 37 and we're talking about this happening in 1976. Unfortunately, 25 years

ago not that kids are greater now, but there were less children in regular high-schools with disabilities, and there was less integration . So I think it was worse then. I say this in hopes that we're better people now, and that we've come a long way. And I think that maybe there's something said to a certain degree for starting a child off in kindergarten or grade one who is legally blind cuz then kids are kind of use too being in class with a kid who's blind. And the child who's blind is used to being in that kind of environment from day one. Um, so there was definitely a lot of, you know, a lot of outcast.

-Mary 37 years-

In a lot of ways, I believe everyone should spend a period of time being blind, and then they would gain the most understanding about it, and maybe even about life as well. They'd understand that being a blind child is not always so easy, especially when you have kids who throw gum wraps into your hair, or trip you on purpose just as you're taking your step to get into the bus. It was funny to the other kids, but it wasn't funny to me. I held my tears until I got home, and made sure that my parents didn't see me cry... when these terrible things started happening I didn't share them with anyone, cuz I was hoping I'd wake up and it would all be a dream... I hated going to school cuz I never knew what was going to happen to me that day.

-Doug 19 years-

'We're here to help you': Acceptance

Only one of the respondents during elementary years reported acceptance from her classmates and teachers. She expressed gratitude for their continual support and reports to have not experienced any discrimination from them. For Gloria, elementary school served as a second haven. She explains it best:

My elementary years were exploratory with teachers and classmates. My teachers were friendly and helpful. The children also tried to help me out a lot. I remember on my birthday a classmate bringing me a long shoe string so that I could attach it to my magnifying lens, and then support it around my neck. The children would always say, 'we're here to help.' I have to say my elementary school years were good to me..

-Gloria 39 years-

Despite the fact that only one of the respondents experienced acceptance by their elementary peers and teachers, these other examples vividly illustrate the childhood ostracization the respondents endured. The prominent themes of victimization that

emerged throughout elementary school environment were: name-calling and teasing, and physical violence. Mainstream cultural norms in the education sphere encourage children to feel a sense of belonging with their classmates. Unfortunately, these negative attitudes related to social distance between themselves and their classmates.

Peer groups become increasingly important in middle childhood, being rivaled only by the family as the child's major developmental setting. The importance of the peer group derives partly from the sheer amount of time the elementary school children spend with peers (Sroufe et al., 1996: 459). Peer relations may be especially important for learning to regulate aggression and for understanding the principles of loyalty and equity, important foundations for moral development. They also help challenge youngsters to develop interaction skills. According to Asher and Parker (1989), experiences within the peer group whether positive or negative can greatly affect a child's self-concept and future dealings with others. Perhaps, for this reason, how well a child gets along with peers is one of the strongest predictors of later success. It is related to levels of adjustment, psychological problems and even school achievement.

For Goffman, it is quite ordinary for the 'normals' in this case the classmates to think of the respondents as 'not quite human.' On this judgement, variety of discrimination are effective in 'imputing a wide range of imperfections' through 'daily discourse' (1963:5). Without giving thought to these specific terms, the respondents were labeled as 'defects' standing outside of the suspected norm. If the respondents should have defended themselves, Goffman would argue that the classmates may "perceive his defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his defect" (1963:6). As Melissa

previously mentioned it was difficult for her to defend herself. She vividly recalls, “ I wouldn’t know what to say.” She was also ‘afraid’ of how they might ‘react’ to her defense.

Most of the respondents revealed that the situation improved as they approached adolescence, but sadly some found that it was the same, if not, the worst of times.

High-School- Adolescence

Three of the respondents experienced vision loss during their adolescent years. While five of the interviewees indicated that as they got older and moved on to high-school, they experienced more physical violence, discrimination and prejudice relating to their blindness. During this period teachers became much less understanding towards their visual difficulties, while some classmates became curious about their visual tendencies and posed questions. Only one of the respondents reported that blindness was regarded as a novelty by his fellow classmates.

‘Nobody will ever marry her’: Name-calling and teasing

Name-calling and teasing progressed into their adolescent years, and became prominent in the lives of those respondents who had lost their sight during this period in their lives. Of the 12 respondents, only 8 of them experienced vision loss during adolescence. Of these eight respondents, only 3 reported severe name-calling and teasing throughout their adolescent years in high-school. They were teased for their visual difficulties, and for the special requests they made as a result of their disability.

High-school was very difficult for me because I was pre-occupied with my identity, and because I was corresponding with in-groups and boys. I had a hard time with the teenagers and boys. They weren’t accepting of me. Teenagers can be quite cruel when

they're 13 and 14. Their perception of people could be tough in some ways. I didn't feel beautiful... The school was dark so I would usually hold on to my friends in the school hallways, and then I would hear, 'Look at the 2 lesbians.' I thought my chances of ever dating were slim... people also think that just because I'm blind I can't hear what they say. 'Nobody will ever marry her, they don't want that responsibility,' or 'poor girl, she's going to be single all her life unless she finds someone who's willing to take the whole package.' What assholes! The popular girls always made fun of me. I couldn't stand the bitches. Sorry about that.

-Melissa 23 years-

When I had gotten into high-school, I had a very difficult time being able to read the board. I sat in the front of the class so that it would make my life easier. A lot of the boys in class said that I was trying to kiss up to the teacher and that's why I was sitting up front. They used to say that our teacher would know what I was trying to do and that I would end up failing... I also had a hard time writing my exams. I needed the extra time, and the kids would say that not only was I blind, but also stupid cuz I'd need more time than them. They weren't all mean, but I recall those situations.

-Mark 45 years-

So you come from being the 'special' kid in elementary school, the one that everyone pays attention to, to the one that no one wants to be bothered with, or the one that no one wants to bother with. They begin to see you as indifferent, and start to pick on you. So that was really really hard, and awful, to have no friends, especially during adolescence when everyone is hanging out with their friends. They'd call me 'fat blind girl.' The worst was having boys call me 'yuk.' They were terrible years.

-Mary 37 years-

Kids in high-school would make fun of me sometimes. You know, they'd laugh at my dark glasses, or call me the 'crippled' old man cuz of my walk stick. They were just losers, and I'd try not to let it get to me... Sometimes they took me for a fool too like they could do whatever they wanted with me. Like in high-school, I had classmates lead me to the girls' changing room. I remember walking in and hearing all the girls scream so loud. There was this one girl who said, 'oh it's the blind guy Patrick, he can't see us anyway, we're okay.' Incidents like these made me feel stupid.

-Patrick 18 years-

'Push' and 'Pull': Physical Violence

In worse cases, the respondents were victims of different forms of physical violence that occurred in different school zones or outside of school premises by students of their grade. Classmates would pull their chair away during class-time, or, shove them

into a locker. These acts of degradation and humiliation often led to feelings of anger and frustration. Respondents did not feel a sense of belonging and frequently wondered why they should even attend school.

My parents were getting worried too cuz the kids could get really cruel, but maybe there's more that my parents should have, or could have done, it's hard to know. I guess they did the best they could, I don't know, but it's also possible that they could have been different parents ya know. They certainly didn't give me a tremendous amount of advice. A lot of times they would tell me to hang in there. But as I was going to say, the kids in high-school were just awful. They pulled my chair a lot of times, and I landed most of the time on my ass. I remember them laughing at me. That was just awful. Teachers would help me as much as they could. I really hated getting help, cuz I knew it made me look even more helpless.

-Mary 37 years-

Of course, I wouldn't see any of this coming. I had kids from my high-school traveling like me from Ile Perrot to Dorval by train hide my school bag on the train so I would miss my stop. Once my father had to come pick me up quite far down the line. Another time, I had to take a Taxi back a few miles and have my mother pay for it when I got home. Once, these same high-school boys put my school bag in the luggage lockers in Dorval train station. When I went to get it out from one of the bottom lockers, they pushed me in and closed the locker. All of this made me very aggressive. But I didn't do much about it. I was afraid. One of the said, he might push me into the train tracks.

-Kevin 41 years-

...going back to the public, I haven't had much negative experiences. The only negative experience that I had was...actually there are some but I'm quite embarrassed to go into all of them ya know. But one of the negative ones is that once I was standing at the bus stop, the bus stop that goes to my house. And ya know, I'm allowed to go in front of the line, cause it's difficult for me and people who are blind to find the end of the line, especially if the line is really, really long...anyhow there was a jackass teenager who was cegep student, cuz I was going to cegep already at that time. He thought he was so cool and everything. He was in front of the line, and I went in front of it like I normally do, and he said to his friends, 'this guy always stands in front of the line bla, bla, bla.' He was being stupid, a jackass, and I was just ignoring it all. I was being nice to him and said, 'no problem, I mean I'm not trying to butt into your line. I'm allowed to be here. Its no problem if you go on first, it's fine, go right ahead.' Yeah, so that was just one my negative experiences....Anyhow, they started pushing me around, and tried to trip me too. It's funny they tried to do what I tried to do to them. Whatever, there's always going to be jerks out there ya know.

-Patrick 18 years-

'The kids are giggling and laughing at you, stop that immediately': Teachers as offenders.

While the adolescents' cruelty towards each other is apparent, it is important to point out that teachers' insensitive and often taunting remarks could be just as cruel, if not worse to the respondents. As Gloria vividly recalls, "I couldn't understand how using magnifying lens could disrupt the class"... "the other kids are giggling and laughing at you stop that immediately." Evidently, teachers were indifferent and as a result did not comprehend the stray of difficulties many of the respondents had to endure during class time. Some of the respondents revealed with anger that some teachers showed lack of support when they were victimized by other students. As Mary recalls, "when the kids called me names, sometimes they would just tell me to ignore it, and other times they wouldn't do anything at all. That would get me so mad! I mean, here they are trying to control the classroom, and they would do their job. Maybe it's because I was the only one with a visual impairment."

Some of the respondents revealed that teachers were not positive reinforcers that gave them the motivation they needed to succeed in endeavors. Melissa remembers one of her professors saying, "you could never be a dancer with a visual impairment." Other like Nelson agreed with Mary in saying that sometimes "teachers do not want me in their classes" because of his blindness.

In addition, two respondents expressed frustration, at the fact that teachers were insensitive to their needs. They claimed that they were perfectly capable of completing the assignments as the other students in the class, but were not provided with the necessary

materials to integrate them into the classroom. This unfortunate tendency made students like Mary feel, “they didn’t want me there.” Mark also remembers when he was experiencing difficulties with one of his teachers. As he recalls, she stated, “If I couldn’t keep up with the others then maybe I shouldn’t be there.” In the following, the respondents share their most painful experiences with teachers.

In school, I had a lot of problems wit other kids who thought it was funny to give me problems... I also had problems with some teachers who did not understand that, one second I could pick-up a dime off the floor and the next second fall over a desk. They accused me of being clumsy and too lazy to look where I was going. In those days, teachers didn’t know much about kids with special needs. Things have come a long way.

-Kevin 41 years-

I was so pre-occupied with my identity during my adolescent years and there was this one teacher who really didn’t make things easy for me. I wanted to take modern dance and jazz lessons when I was 16 years old. It was in my senior year of high-school. I had an asshole of a teacher who told me, ‘you could never be a dancer with a visual impairment.’ He told me, ‘it’s going to be difficult for you to keep up with the others.’ It sucked being there when you didn’t have your own teacher who believed you could do it.

I stopped the class, and then knew of another teacher offering the same class the year after. What an amazing teacher who taught me the right techniques. This enhanced my self-concept in so many ways to deal with clearer idea of where I was going. Today I’ve taken it up professionally. I work 18 hours a week in training, and my instructor says I’m going to go really far.

-Melissa 23 years-

In elementary school, the teachers tried to help me as much as they could. I really hated getting help, cuz I knew it made me look more helpless... I look forward to going home at the end of the day. Week-ends were the best! They seemed so far away, and yet when Friday came along, the week-end went by so fast... So you come from being the special kid the one everyone pays attention to, to the one that no one wants to be bothered with, or the one that no one wants to bother with... the teacher in my home-room would talk to the class 2 to 3 times, you know and talk about my disability, you know like having a visually impaired kid around. I wasn’t there when she said it, but I was really embarrassed at the time when I found out that this had been going on. They weren’t very supportive of me, and I also felt like they didn’t want me there... when the kids called me names, sometimes the teachers would just tell me to ignore it, and other times they wouldn’t do anything at all. That would get me so mad! I mean, here they are trying to control the classroom, and they wouldn’t do their job. Maybe it’s because I was the only

one with a visual impairment. But still to allow that kind of behavior to go on in the classroom. They were cruel for doing that to me. It's like I wasn't an important student to defend...I also well, I don't know how to say this, had not been prepared in terms of the amount of education that I had received. So I wasn't as good in school. And then I went to secondary school. At the time they didn't have the same type, and amount of services as they had today. I had to struggle with reading the materials, things weren't on tape.

They either didn't put the materials on tape, or my parents and teachers didn't know about the services that were made available. Not that there were many, cuz the majority of services did not exist at the time. They didn't have shadows back then really,. So I struggled on my own. So I really struggled on my own. So in a way, it wasn't a good experiences. And my teachers really never helped me with getting these materials. I think they saw me as this extra burden on their shoulder. I had this one teacher tell me that it was good thing to leave regular high-school so that I could be with others who had the same condition as me. I wondered if she meant it was going to be good for her cuz she didn't have to deal with me anymore. And of course, as my vision got worse, I was removed from regular high-school.

-Mary 37 years-

In Mary's above response, we begin to understand how a student's perception of the choices her teacher makes can ultimately reinforce their own belief of how unsupportive they could blind students in the classroom. For Mary, there are a list factors that made her feel this way. For instance, she recalls teachers telling her to ignore others who were name-calling her in the classroom. This reaction only made her feel "like she wasn't an important student to defend... ." This response devalued her own sense of being.

Mary also felt as though she was not given the proper materials to help her succeed in class. They never made the extra effort to obtain the materials she needed, and this only made Mary feel "as this extra burden on their shoulder." Not only was this negative, but being directly told to leave regular high-school made her especially think, as she states, "I wondered if she meant it was going to be good for her cuz she didn't have to deal with me anymore." All these different and over-impacting experiences help explain why Mary didn't feel much enthusiasm to attend school on a regular basis.

I expected to go on the same way as I did in highschool...in highschool I had already established the way I worked in the classroom and teachers thought I was disrupting the class. I couldn't understand how using magnifying lens could disrupt the class? Teachers often said, "the other kids are giggling and laughing at you, stop that immediately!" Of course that hurts coming from my own teachers. It hurt more than being made fun of from other children.

-Gloria 39 years-

In elementary school I could still see quite a bit. But when I got to high-school my eyesight kept deteriorating. Some of the negative experiences I encountered in school was not being able to read the board and many times writing up exams. I told some of my teachers the problems I was having and some of them told me that if I couldn't keep up with the others then maybe I shouldn't be there...when I realized I wasn't getting any help, I knew the right thing to do was go somewhere where I could get educated without going out of my mind. And that's exactly what my parents did, they got me out of there and took me to the M.A.B.

-Mark 45 years-

In school, being the first blind student to get a D.E.C. in pure and applied sciences had many academic barriers. There were many teachers, especially chemistry teachers who did not want me in their classes. Still to this day, in the university, there are some professors who have a narrow mind when it comes to the blind in their classes because of the labs. I understand this, of course, but you must fight for equal access even in dangerous situations.

-Nelson 31 years-

'Dealing with things on my own': Isolation: feelings of not belonging

Not surprisingly, the respondents who recounted negative experiences of school hostility were likely to indicate they were neglected and isolated. Making friends and keeping them was not easy. They often found themselves as indifferent, and cast themselves from the rest of their classmates. Isolation occurred as the result of an array of different experiences. The major themes that arose were not having the necessary materials needed to integrate them into class-text material. Not having any friends to talk to, or having friends who would ignore them while they were around. In addition, being removed from regular school and placed in a rehabilitation school lead to feelings of

loneliness and isolation.

In this section, the respondents share detailed accounts of what contributed to their feelings of self-isolation.

I wouldn't want to relive those years. That particular year was awful, well actually, highschool wasn't a whole lot better. Let's just say, if you think things were bad in elementary school, it got worse in high-school. I honestly don't know how I made it. I remember staying home a lot. I'd fake being sick. Whether my mom really bought into it or not, that's another story, but I remember staying home a lot. A lot. Probably a quarter of the whole year I lived at home. Yeah... My parents knew! I talked to my mom, my parents knew! I know they did! I did tell them... I looked forward to going home at the end of the day. Week-ends were the best! They seemed so far away, and yet when Friday came along, it went by so fast... I mean it's not nice to say this, but, I just wish someone else in school was going through the same thing I was. I hate saying that, but, I really didn't have anyone I could share stuff with, you know. I always felt like I was dealing with things on my own and that was really hard.

-Mary 37 years-

Let's just talk about the challenge of getting into your teens! Being blind, and a teenager wasn't easy. Not everyone knows what that feels like! If you think being a teenager is hard, try being one with out being able to see. Like any other teenager, I wanted to take on new experiences, and my parents became once again, over protective. I wasn't allowed to do certain stuff, like roller-skating, or cycling. They'd say, "you'll fall, and get tramped on." They made feel overly sheltered and this made me cut off relationships with kids on my won. What bugged me the most was that this always had to do with my vision and my parents. It had less to do with my disability, and more to do with what they thought was right for me... I felt very alone during my high-school years. I didn't have many friends, no one to talk too. I didn't go to those school dances, or field trips and didn't discuss these events with the others in my grade. I didn't talk much, and they didn't talk to me either.

-Gloria 39 years-

I had classmates who were cruel to me. But sometimes my friends could be just as bad. I guess it depends from who. There were some people who reacted differently depending who I'd be talking about. If it's your best-friends who shows more embarrassment that's even worse. There used to be occasions when I couldn't help but have tears coming out of my eyes. I am who I am. They told me to stop exaggerating. We all grow up though. I think at a certain point, my friends forgot that I had a disability. You know how it comes to park a car, it became that invisible to them... but sure, there were times when I avoided to go out with them, cuz I also felt excluded from their conversations. Like going to the

mall with them was just the most awful experience. They'd say things like, 'hey guys, check out that cute guy with his friends.' They would all giggle, and laugh. I'd laugh a long with them, not knowing who they were talking about. It was like that most of the time when I was with them and I hated it. I didn't tell them how I was feeling, but I think some of them knew, and just ignored it because I never brought anything up... there were good times and bad times. There were days when I just wanted to be left alone.

-Melissa 23 years-

... in 1991, when we came here I started school. I started French school and I was thinking, and managing okay, but I had to sit close to the board, in the first row actually, to be able to see what was on the black board. Being in a French school wasn't easy, you know. You're totally immigrant. You know nothing about French so it wasn't helpful if you sit in the front, I mean it doesn't help you if you sit in the back of the class either. So and then yeah I mean it was great being in French school because I wanted to learn French. I was young, I was 12, almost 13 at the time. Anyway, so yeah, so basically I was ready to learn French and I was in a French school where I met a lot of other immigrant kids who I became friends with... I started going there for about 6 months, or so. But then in January, in 1992 my doctor consulted the MAB social workers to discuss my situation. He told them, "there's this kid who goes to French school and he's kind of struggling, he needs help from you guys, you should provide services, and rehabilitation, and stuff like that. The school was also expressing concern because they thought I was really having problems because of my visual impairment...well if you want me to fast-forward a little bit, in 1992, I went to the M.A.B., they transferred me there because they convinced my parents and family that I was really having a lot of trouble in my regular high-school. The social workers decided to attend a few of my classes and they said they noticed that I was experiencing difficulty. You know how social workers are, they really see what they want to, they really want clients. Especially the social worker I had, she was finishing up her masters. She was a McGill student. And at the time, she was doing her MBA, and she saw this as a great opportunity for her cuz she was going to get this kid, which was me, and then she'd have a job at the M.A.B. so as a result she did end up with a job at the M.A.B. She also received some sort of funding from the government when they put me into a specialized school like the M.A.B. ... so anyway, after convincing my parents after a while, it would be better for me to go to that specialized school to get some training, so that when I come back to a regular high-school I would be able to survive much better. I learned computers over there, they wanted me to learn braille, but at that time, I refused to learn braille because I was able to see a fair amount. All I needed was large print in books. There are books with large print.... anyway one of the things I lacked was going to school to learn how to speak in French, cuz the M.A.B is all in English. So I thought as a result of that, now it was going to be difficult for me to find a job. Not only was it going to be difficult to find a job as a visually impaired, but not being able to be a bilingual person, you know, it's hard to find a job when you've got those barriers. So that's one of the things I kind of regret and kind of hate. I don't hate them, but that I wish I acquired my French and English verbal skills. And so, and also the thing, is that the school was

very isolated because in the early eighties they started integrating other people with multi-handicaps. I think in the seventies, you see the M.A.B. had been existing for a hundred years or so. And back in the early days, the kids that would stay there were severely blind. Today, there's a lot more kids going to that type of school. But now that society is changing, kids are more integrated into regular high-school so that they can let blind and visually impaired kids experience what it's like in the real world. But at that time when I went there in early 90's, things were changing back then cause kids were being integrated so there weren't as many kids. So what I didn't like was the total isolation like you weren't able to interact with a lot more people than you would in a regular high-school. And a lot of the kids that were around you were blind or visually impaired also. So I saw the same kind of people everyday, it's kind of like going to work and seeing your boss everyday, except it's your teacher, or like your co-workers. So that's what it was like for me. So those were the things I especially didn't like about that school. ... anyway, so in 1994, I was about to get out of the M.A.B.. I always felt like I didn't belong. It wasn't where I wanted to be. I felt different. I didn't feel like I was one of them, so I never really talked to the kids that much. I would always isolate myself from the crowd. Spring of 1994, when kids are about to get out high-school, that's when I left the M.A.B in June. I was supposed to start regular high-school in September of 1994. They decided to put me in an English school, not in a French one. That's another mistake that they did. You know, I wanted to go back to the French school I was previously attending, but my social worker and everyone else was controlling my life. Cause you know when they first put me in the M.A.B, I also did not have any control. I actually cried my eyes out cause I met quite a good bunch of people at my regular high-school. I made friends and everything, and now I kind of lost those friends that I made in that French school...I was quite a shy person so it did not help not being able to see very much, trying to make new friends in this English school, you know. And trying to fit in, you know, it was hard. That was a difficult part of my life. And the fact that I was in total isolation in the MAB did not help improve my social skills. That was one of the things I lacked. And you know, me going into the real world, it doesn't help if you don't have very good social skills. Or how you're going on, fitting in, or approaching things. You know when you're with your friends, you wonder how you're going to basically interact. So that was one of the downfalls.

-Patrick 18 years-

In Patrick's response we learn that feelings of isolation could be the result of the combination of various elements. Patrick's response helps us understand that when are lives are controlled by someone other than ourselves, this could have damaging affects in our lives. In Patrick's case, the amalgamation of various life changing events brought on feelings isolation. He was forced to attend a rehabilitation without having a say in this

decision. As he puts it, “they convinced my parents and family that I was really having a lot of trouble... .” Patrick did not feel he belonged in the rehabilitation school. The courses were provided in English, and this became of a concern for Patrick. Not only was he stripped from a regular educational environment, he was now only restricted to learning in English. Patrick was concerned that not improving his French would prevent him from finding employment in the workforce. As he mentioned in the above, “Not only was it going to be difficult to find a job as a visually impaired, but not being able to be a bilingual person, you know, it’s hard to find a job when you’ve got those barriers.”

Patrick recalls feeling very isolated in this rehabilitation school, as they had not at the time integrated other children with multi-handicaps. He recalls the school not letting “blind and visually impaired kids experience what it’s like in the real world... so what I didn’t like was the total isolation like you weren’t able to interact with a lot more people than you would in a regular high-school.” Patrick expressed the need to interact with other people outside of the visually impaired realm. This need made him feel like he ‘didn’t belong.’ As Patrick recalls, “It wasn’t where I wanted to be. I felt different.” His willingness to go back to regular high-school is what persuaded him to proceed with necessary training to re-organize his life skills. Not having control in life changing decisions contributed to these feelings of isolation.

Back in my days, children and adolescents who were blind and handicapped were sent to a special school in Montreal. I was in regular high-school near my house till grade 6. After grade 6, I was considered legally blind. And it was at this point in my life where they sent me here in Montreal. I was born and raised in Trois Rivieres. I had to cut all my relations off. I left at home. I had to cut the relation with my friends at school, with my teachers, and with my family. I only saw my family at Christmas. ...I remember one of my friends said that when I arrived I was very depressed. I don’t remember that. I met a

lot of friends in this institution. I also felt like everything was prepared for blind people and for other visually impaired. And at first, I was okay with that. But after a few months, I realized that when I went home, I felt my family was not mine. I felt like I was a stranger to them. At 13 years-old I think you can't understand that. It was in my head there was no connection for that. Why did I feel like a stranger with my family? And when I went back to the institution, I felt the same awkward feeling. With time I realized there were ten students in the class. I was the first one to have the best grades in the class. And I was not like that in regular school. I felt uncomfortable in that. I also felt that in this institution there were many children who came from poor families and my family was not poor. And when I explained to my teacher that I could swim, visit people and go to many places with my family to do things she wouldn't understand. It was important for me to be very active, and I noticed that it was not like that for them. I felt very strange, caught between 2 worlds. It was a struggle for me to be happy and comfortable where I was. I didn't feel connected to the other kids. It was hard to be in there cuz I thought I was limited in my ability to do things. I hated it, and yet, I still had to stay there. I remember some of the other kids telling me that I was unusual. This one girl kept telling me, 'Why are you here? This place isn't for you.' I guess she was the only one who understood me... I spent a lot of time in my room while I was there. I didn't communicate with the other kids at one point. My mom knew I wasn't happy, but she was told that it was the best place for me to be in. No one really listened to me, and that made me angry.

-Valerie 42 years-

Similar to Patrick's response, Valerie felt particularly isolated at the rehabilitation school she was placed in. Total isolation came from feelings of not being able to associate with others. Valerie felt different from her school classmates, even though they were all in this rehabilitation school to learn the same life skills. She insisted that she felt no 'connection' to others in the school. Everything was 'prepared' for her when she got there, something she had not been exposed to back at home. She recalls feeling 'very depressed' at her arrival in the school. Valerie recalls, "it was hard to be in there cuz I thought I was limited in my ability to do things."

However, Valerie also felt out of place when she returned home. She didn't feel she was at home with the same people she grew up with. As she recalls, "I felt like a

stranger to them.” Valerie describes these times to be most difficult. She remembers spending a lot of time in her room and not communicating with others. As a result, this left her feeling unhappy and suspecting that no one really was listening to her feelings.

From the five respondents responses, we come to understand that isolation was a result of certain tendencies. For instance, for some respondents like Mary, she argued that she had not been ‘equipped’ with the necessary materials that were needed for her to be academically integrated with her other classmates. Unfortunately, she admits that not having been ‘equipped’ with the materials caused her to not be ‘as good in school’ as the other students. Mary also admits to having not been ‘prepared in terms of the amount of education’ she received.

Three of the respondents recall that isolation came as the result of having no friends throughout the highschool years. As Gloria vividly remembers, “I didn’t have many friends to talk to.” Not having someone to share feelings with can become quite depressing for the child. For other respondents like Melissa, isolation was still brought upon even though she had friends to be around with. As Melissa points out, “sometimes my friends could be just as bad.” Melissa recalls events in her time when her friends showed signs of ‘embarrassment’ or ‘ignored’ her while she was present around them. Goffman described Melissa’s view of the situation as how the “stigmatized arises the sense of not knowing what the others present are ‘really’ thinking about him” (Goffman, 1963:14).

In Goffman’s, *Stigma and Social Identity*,’ he alleges that the “first set of sympathetic others is of course those who share his stigma” (20). Mary recounts: “ I just

wish someone else in school was going through the same thing I was. I hate saying that, but, I really didn't have anyone I could share stuff with, you know. I always felt like I was dealing with things on my own and that was really hard." Goffman conveys that it would be normal for Mary to respond in this manner. "Knowing from their own experience what it is like to have this particular stigma, some of them can provide the individual with instruction in the tricks of the trade and with a circle of lament to which he can withdraw for moral support and for the comfort of feeling at home, at ease, accepted as a person who really is like any other normal person" (Goffman, 1963: 20). In Mary's case, having classmates go through the same process would perhaps provide her with the necessary means of leaning on someone for support, or simply to withdraw some tension and discuss the ways in which she could make things work better for her life.

Two of the respondents felt isolated when they were removed from regular high-school and were placed in a rehabilitation schools for a certain period of time. Both respondents recall not fitting in these rehabilitation school. As Patrick vividly recalls, "I always felt like I didn't belong. It wasn't where I wanted to be." Valerie expresses the same feelings. She felt that the rehabilitation schools did not understand that she could do a lot more than what she actually thought. She explains, "I didn't feel connected to the other kids. It was hard to be in there cuz I thought I was limited in my ability to do things. I hated it, and yet I still had to stay there." This lack of connection with the others in the rehabilitation school provided her with feelings of self-isolation.

'Kinda Cool': Novelty-Curiosity and questions

Only one of the eight respondents reported classmates striking him as a 'novelty' and man-made 'curiosity' during his high-school years. Doug explains:

During high-school kids looked at me in a different way. It was 'kinda cool' they said. I was sort of a novelty and then a curiosity. I was seen as the special guy that was asked a lot of questions. 'How did you do that man?' The kids were always so surprised at what I could do. I mean to me it was nothing, but to them it was like, how did he do that? My walking cane caused a lot of attention. I'd have some of the kids at school ask me if they could try it... They'd touch my dark glasses all the time like they were the coolest sunglasses they had ever seen in their lives... during lunch time there were a few guys I'd have lunch with. Sometimes they'd ask me 'how do you know where to bite into your sandwich?' I'd just laugh and wouldn't say much. I mean sometimes it's as though they thought I was some useless idiot who couldn't do much. It didn't bother me cuz they weren't mean or anything like that. So I guess that's better than having them tease you. And sometimes it was hard for them to understand that I could do well in school. I used to have some of the highest grades in the class and some kids just couldn't understand how. I heard this one girl say once, 'we know he didn't cheat cuz, he can't see.'... I guess you could say I was the new kid on the block that was a whole lot different than the regular kids. To them 'I was kinda cool.' I guess it wasn't all that bad.

-Doug 19 years-

In the above remarks, Doug expresses that he was regarded as a 'novelty' by his classmates: he was 'kinda cool.' Sometimes his classmates' questions would make him laugh. He admits that these questions of curiosity was seen as better than having them 'tease him.' The only problem that Doug admits was having them think he was 'a useless idiot' who could not do things for himself. It was hard for some of his classmates to understand that just because you're blind does not mean you are incompetent. In Doug's case, Goffman contends that us so-called 'normals' would tend to hold beliefs that anyone stepping out of the norm, such as a disabled should be thought of as a 'defect.' He goes on to say that we use specific stigma terms to 'impute a wide range of imperfections' (1963:5).

However, Doug was the exception which Goffman did not recognize. In his work he describes how those with a stigma are always stigmatized. Others like Doug may also avoid the teasing or ridiculing, or may simply see themselves as ordinary as any one else would. Unlike most of the respondents, Doug did not view himself as 'incompetent' because of his visual impairment. Therefore, not all individuals with a stigma are stigmatized.

This section of the chapter vividly discusses the childhood ostracization the respondents endured. The prominent themes of victimization that arose from school's hostile environment were: name-calling and teasing, physical violence, and acceptance. Only one of the respondents who experienced vision loss during childhood years expressed acceptance by her classmates and teachers. As a result from the victimization, the respondents did not feel the sense of belonging within their class environment. This indicates that acceptance may be a daily battle for children who are legally blind and placed in a regular elementary school. At a young age the respondents "perceive quite correctly, that whatever others profess, they do not really 'accept' him and are not ready to make contact with him on 'equal grounds'" (Goffman, 1963:7). Kuusisto, blind from birth, notes that the "craving to appear like your peers is an enslavement at any age, but is particularly bad at childhood" (1999:41). As a result, feelings of isolation ultimately were the consequences that the respondents endured. Elementary school consists of one the child's important microsystem. Childhood consists of the development of self-worth. According to Breyspraal (1984), isolation makes it especially difficult for children to further enhance and, or develop feelings of self-worth (100).

Respondents expressed that high-school years were especially trying as well. For some, fitting in could be hard, if not harder in the adolescent context. When contrasted to the elementary years five themes emerged from the respondents experiences during high-school: name-calling and teasing, physical violence, teachers as offenders, and being regarded as a novelty by classmates. For some respondents, name-calling and teasing continued to persist throughout high-school. Many respondents also continued to endure physical violence, whether it be from 'taunting' train rides home from school, or from being 'pushed' and 'pulled' during classroom time.

As respondents entered high-school, cegep, or university, teachers were viewed by the interviewees as insensitive, and offensive to the taunting action and remarks of themselves and others. Many of the respondents recall teachers having not been prepared to provide them with the necessary means and materials to achieve academically. Evidently, some teachers lacked confidence in the respondent's level of competency to determine academic tasks. Evidently, some teachers were simply negligent in the student's abilities to succeed educationally. In one case, a teacher notified a respondent that if she couldn't keep up with the others maybe regular high-school wasn't the place for her to be in.

Isolation also became a prominent theme during the adolescent years. Respondents expressed their frustration with teachers and peers. Not surprisingly, the respondents recounted how the experiences of school hostility lead to isolation. They became cast from the rest of peers. Not having any friends to talk to contributed to their self-isolation. According to Goffman (1963), "lacking the salutary feed-back of daily intercourse with

others, the self-isolate can become suspicious, depressed, hostile, anxious, and bewildered” (Goffman, 1963:13).

Finally, legally blind adolescents may be viewed as a novelty and may be posed questions of curiosity about their blindness. Only one of the respondents reported such an experience. In this case, Goffman theory’s applies those who are regarded as ‘novelties.’ As Goffman suggests, in many cases the moments when the stigmatized and the normals encounter “will be ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides” (13). It becomes the opportunity for the normals to pose questions to the stigmatized with regards to their disability. During this time, the stigmatized feels unsure of how the normals will identify him. Doug revealed that sometimes students could not understand how he could accomplish so successfully academically. Goffman contends that this behaviour is typical of the normals. He explains how the stigmatized might view the situation: “his minor accomplishments, he feels may be assessed as signs of remarkable and noteworthy capacities in the circumstances” (1963: 14). Hence, Doug is not seen as a determined accomplished student, but as some who perhaps might find a way out of something in order to get a way with it. However, Goffman does not take into account that not all those with a stigma are stigmatized by others who surround them. Their disability does not make them less ordinary than anyone else, but allots uniqueness to their ability to carry on with things in a different way that may perhaps been unusual to other’s ways.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has focused on illustrating the adversities that people who are blind

have had to encounter at different phases of their life, including experiences occurring in the family, and during school years.

Family dynamics was portrayed as a safe and supportive haven for some respondents, while for others, it produced a shell where parents became over-protective which in turn prevented from becoming independent. Most importantly, respondents were free of discrimination and victimization. Only in once case, did a respondent recount that her parents were unsupportive and lacked in furnishing her with the encouragement she needed to adjust accordingly with her disability.

For the most part, it was found that for those respondents who experienced vision loss during childhood-elementary years, these times were filled with unhappy memories of victimization from classmates which resulted in self-isolation. As the respondents reached high-school, they experienced the same results of victimization and isolation. Unlike felt in the elementary school years, respondents reported teachers lacking sensitivity to degrading remarks made by other students, and lacking sensitivity in accumulating knowledge about the necessary materials needed to help the respondents adapt to course-related material. As a result, two respondents were withdrawn from regular high-school and placed in special rehabilitation schools for the visually impaired. In once case, a respondent admitted to not having learnt much throughout her education because she believes she was not 'equipped' with the proper materials needed to accomplish class and homework tasks. Only in one rare case was a respondent regarded as a novelty, a 'special' child who everyone was intrigued about.

So far, the respondents have chronicled in detail about two distinct arenas in their

life in which people reacted to their condition. The next chapter will describe their reactions in intimate relationships.

CHAPTER 6

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

This chapter will focus predominantly on the respondents' experiences in intimate relationships. Dating was difficult during the teenage years but seemed to get better in adulthood. In this chapter we discuss how their legal blindness has affected their romance at some length. Their insights and experiences vary, however their responses can be grouped and brought into different themes. I begin by providing you with each respondents' accounts of how intimate relationships has changed over the years.

'Dating didn't exist for me': Dating in Adolescence

Dating was difficult during the teenage years, however, most of the respondents reported much more difficulties later in life. Eight of the twelve respondents were legally blind during early to late adolescence. During high-school, most of the respondents report having a difficult time interacting with students of the opposite sex which made it even more challenging to date.

High-school was difficult. You're pre-occupied with your identity. It was hard corresponding with boys too. I had a very hard time with them. I never got too close to speak to them... like I mentioned to you before, sometimes they would call me 'lesbian' when I used to hang on to my friends in the school hallways. I couldn't stand them sometimes, they could be so cruel.... I think it was during my final year of high-school when I started talking to them, but that's about it. So, basically to answer to your question, dating was out of the question during this period of my life. I don't think they gave me a second look because of my visual impairment.

-Melissa 23 years-

I didn't really talk to girls that much during high-school. I mean I did, but never really asked them out on a date or anything like that. I was shy with them. I didn't know how they would react. I used to tell myself, 'better not ask them out anyway since I won't be able to drive them anywhere.' I realized that another drawback to this whole dating thing is that I would never be able to drive my own car, which has a twofold disadvantage

behind it. I have to rely on public transit, or friends or relatives to get around, and second, there is a certain status symbol having and being able to drive a car or truck especially for a guy in his teens, or late teens, and even early 20's. I used to tell myself, I'd have to ask my dad to drive us to the movies, when all my other classmates were driving their own dates around. This really bugged and is one of the main reasons why I didn't ask girls out during high-school.

-Doug 19 years-

I had trouble getting closer to boys during high-school because of how I was brought up. My mom would always tell me that boys and eventually men wouldn't want to get close to me unless they were also visually impaired. And for a long time I believed that because I had never met a couple before where the guy had all of his sight, and the girl was visually impaired. I looked at my parents, and they were a perfect example of what my mom was telling me. The blind normally stick to their own kind. I hate to think that's what I grew up with this thinking. I believed it for so many years, and I know I may have missed getting to know some really nice guys. In high-school and cegep I was always afraid to get close to boys. I thought maybe they'd laugh at me if I told them I wanted to get close to them. Why would they want to be with a visually impaired girl? I just wish my mom hadn't told me what she did many years ago. What an awful thing to say to your daughter. She ruined so much for me, my chances, and my perception on how guys liked girls.

-Mary 37 years-

Dating in high-school was a horrible experience. Some girls were nice to me, but others could be cruel. I'm not sure if they were because of my visual impairment, but I'm sure it played a role in it. I didn't date much in the first place. I asked them out to school dances and parties. They'd often just leave me there standing. Several times when I asked a girl to dance and found that she disappeared on the dance floor in front of me and I couldn't find her. This may now seem funny but it was tragic to me... I don't know if they accepted to go to the dance with me cuz they really liked me, or because they felt sorry for me.

-Kevin 41 years-

At 19, I wasn't in any romantic relationships. I didn't have many guy friends I should say. My friends were mostly females. I felt unattractive. Of course, I had many crushes, and I didn't think they would give me a second look... I didn't talk much to the guys in high-school. I didn't have any self-esteem because I felt ugly because I had this visual deficiency. So I tried to stay as far away from guys as I could.

-Gloria 39 years-

Well actually, you know what, I made a few friends, but I didn't go to a lot of parties. It was difficult for me to ask girls if they would like to go on a date. Like I mentioned before I was very shy. And after being in total isolation in the MAB, I felt it didn't help improve

my social skills. And as I said, one of the challenge of being totally blind, is not getting to see the person's facial expression of the person you're talking to. That kinda stopped me from talking to girls or asking them out... I really haven't had any serious relationships with girls! I'm shy with them, and I guess it's because I never really had girlfriends... The one good thing about high-school was that I ended up going to my prom. It was cool. I didn't have a date, I tried, but they all said no. I know a lot of times it was because of my visual impairment. But I went with friends and people I knew and I still had a great time.

-Patrick 18 years-

During high-school and most of my adolescent years, I was kinda the shy guy. I didn't talk to girls much cuz I didn't feel they'd like me cuz I had a visual impairment. I didn't approach the girls, and they didn't approach me either. I was very quiet and only talked to them if we were put together in groups to complete projects. So dating didn't exist for me then. But it got better in my twenties.

-Mark 45 years-

In secondary 5, when I was 16 years old I left the special institution I came back to my home and that helped me a lot. What also helped me a lot was that I decided to make friends at a regular high-school and in cegep. In cegep I began to be in a gang which did not consist of any visually impaired. And that helped me out a lot because I met boys and started getting involved with them. Like on the week-ends we would go dancing. I was never in any serious relationships, but it's okay cuz I wasn't looking for that anyway. I was young and wanted to experience how it was like with different boys... Dating wasn't the worst experience for me. It was actually fun. And what helped was hanging out with a group of friends who weren't visually impaired. I began to be comfortable with them, and that helped with my relationship with the boys.

-Valerie 42 years-

For the respondents above, difficulty in dating was the result of specific reasons.

Respondents expressed factors associated with reasons to believe why dating just didn't 'exist' for them during the high-school years. In the previous chapter, most of the respondents agreed that during adolescence they lacked the social ties with others of their own age, especially the opposite sex. One common theme that emerges from the respondents set of sharing is how people who are legally blind often feel they are 'rejected' from dating others because of their visual impairment. This belief contributed to

specific actions taken by respondents. For instance, out of the seven interviewees, Melissa, Mary, Gloria, and Patrick stated that this belief made them feel uncomfortable to speak to the opposite sex, which in turn, just made it difficult for them to have any relationship at all. As a result, this contributed to why they may have experienced greater difficulty in dating. How could they go on a date, if they wouldn't even communicate with the opposite sex? They also explain that their physical appearance was the main factor that caused their unpopularity amongst their peers in relation to dating. Their visual disability was the reason why others were not attracted to them. The respondents believed they were rejected because of their condition. These feelings add to the opportunity of not being seen by other peers as a candidate for dating.

Two of the seven respondents expressed their belief in dating others with a visual impairment. Mark admits to not having talked to girls because he thought they wouldn't like him because of his visual impairment. Mary's sudden belief in this was the result in the making of her mothers's confirmation that "the blind normally stick to their own kind." She admits that as an adolescent her mother's opinion on the possibility of dating someone other than a visually impaired 'ruined' her life chances of ever dating. As a result, Mary prevented herself from contacting with adolescent boys during her high-school years. We could see how a parental standpoint can deeply influence the judgement of an adolescent.

Only one of the respondents expressed fun in dating during adolescence. Valerie expressed great interest during this dating period. In her case, she admits that hanging out among other non-visually impaired children opened the door for interaction with boys.

Making friends at a regular high-school helped her as she states get 'involved' with boys who did not have a visual impairment. Socializing with adolescent boys who had no visual impairment helped in the dating relationship phase. It would appear then, that during high-school years visual impairment of people is a main factor that hinders the formation of intimate relationships. The next section describes the respondent's experiences of intimate relationships in adulthood.

Intimacy in adulthood

It would appear from our respondents that intimate relationships became more prevalent during adulthood. Presently, seven of the respondents are married, while five of them remain single. Drawing upon their responses, a general theme that arose was that even in accepting relationships there can be times when spouses may not understand the process of dealing with blindness. As a result, they begin treat their spouses like a visually impaired person, rather than a regular human being. The following respondents describe those such experiences with their spouses.

Intimacy in marriage: 'First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the blind man to ruin the marriage'.

I was married when I went totally blind. The challenge of being able to refit yourself into your family becomes the biggest shock, and I know I've already mentioned that to you. It was all very new to my wife. She was always there for me. Of course, things were different in the beginning. We didn't go out much. I couldn't drive, and I became very frustrated when I could no longer bring her to the places we used to go together. She told me it didn't bother her, but it bothered me a whole lot. Sometimes she just wouldn't understand that I didn't want things getting done by her. She was always around me trying to protect me from, well I don't know, like falling flat on my face. We weren't as romantic as we used to be. We were so far away from each other, that intimacy really didn't exist. It was the last thing on my mind.... Things started getting better when I realized she was making the effort to make it better. We made the home 'friendlier' for me, I guess if you could say that. What I mean is we made it adjustable for me, like

putting velcro braille prints on the stove so that I know how to identify items on the stove and oven... my wife is the best thing in my life. She stood by me, and told me that my blindness would never tear us apart because we had such a wonderful and loving relationship. She worked with me to make things better. And I know now that after almost 40 years of marriage, it's true love because she stood by me when things weren't looking very good. That's when you know they really love you.

-Bailey 62 years-

... First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the blind man to ruin the marriage...I lost most of my sight as a young child, but eventually lost all of it after I was married. And like I mentioned before, the biggest challenge of all is to make people like your wife understand that we can do things on our own. In the beginning, my wife kept breathing down my neck every minute. She wanted to do everything for me, this of course, bugged me, I couldn't stand it. I felt that my blindness affected our relationship more at the beginning of when it all happened. I found it more difficult to verbally interact with her. I didn't like asking her for help so she wouldn't think that I was completely useless. It would give her more reason to believe that I needed someone to always be with me, cuz at first, she wanted to hire a nurse to take care of me while she went to work. I guess you could say I didn't feel we were husband and wife. She was like a caretaker most of the time. We didn't sleep in the same bed. She thought I needed the extra space so I wouldn't be limited to a small section of the bed. She said she didn't want to find me on the floor in the middle of the night. I really didn't care in the beginning, because I think we both needed our space. Before things could get back to normal in the relationship, she had to understand that things weren't going to work between us if it was gonna stay this way. She had to accept that I was blind, and that if she wanted us to get a new start, she was going to have to accept the way I eventually would do things. It was important for us to work things out, and so she made that effort. She also made me understand that I needed to understand that she needed some time to adjust to the new changes. Things eventually started getting better. We're happy today. I feel that she now sees me as she once did. She understands that just because you're blind, doesn't mean you can't be the loving husband, or the greatest dad.... Things were going to be different, and sometimes difficult, but that happens in every kind of relationship and family.

-Mark 45 years-

I was 27 when I lost all of my sight, and I had already been married and had a child by then too. It was very difficult for my husband to accept it at first. He knew it was just a matter of time before I would eventually lose all of it. He made me feel very different, like the odd one in the relationship all the time. He was over protective all the time, and took care of me like a child, instead of treating me like a wife. This whole change pulled us apart for some time. I needed my space, and he thought I didn't want him anymore. He didn't understand that I was the one who couldn't see and needed some time to deal with it before taking rehabilitation courses. He wanted me to get up the same day when I

lost my sight and start meeting with a mobility trainer. He said, 'the earlier you start, the better it is for you.' I needed time to adjust to all of this. Sometimes I felt like he wanted me out of the house so he wouldn't have to look at me. I didn't want to be intimate with him either. These experiences just brought us further away from each other. I mean there were times when I felt as though he was embarrassed to have me as a wife. When I lost my sight, he stopped taking me out to dinner on Friday nights. We used to go out on Saturday too. We'd leave our daughter with my mother. I found myself going to my mother's more frequently with my daughter. He wouldn't stay. For a long time we slept in separate rooms. My daughter asked us one day, 'why do you and daddy sleep in different rooms?' I didn't know what to tell her. I mean she was only four years old. We couldn't believe that she picked that up. ... My husband and eye eventually went to counseling together. This helped us a lot. It made us understand a lot about each other's feelings. Today we're closer than ever. I didn't think that could be possible after all that we went through, but we managed to get by it.

-Deborah 39 years-

From the respondents' above, one common theme arose in the sharing of their experiences of intimacy. All of them expressed the difficulty in their spouse's ability to manage and control their own lifestyle as a result of their blindness. These aggravations added to their strain which significantly contributed to the emotional distress of their relationship with their spouse. As Bailey recalled, 'we were so far away from each other that intimacy really didn't exist'. Their significant other's behavior contributed somewhat to their frustrations of having to deal with their own ability to see themselves as incompetent and deal with the challenge of reorganizing their lifestyle. These occurrences became matters that added to their already frustrations of incompetency and dealings with the challenge of re-organizing life skills. It became impeding and counter-productive at the utmost in helping them regain their self-confidence to adjust to life's new circumstances.

The respondent's agree that their significant other's constant need to control their lifestyle became directive and facilitated the relationship to be more on a aura where

feelings of self-worth became shamelessly devoured as the significant other's role became of that as a 'caretaker.' From a sociological perspective, the climate of the relationship developed in a positive peek when the spouses realized that their very own perceptions of blindness was unrealistically impeding on the counter-productivity of having a successful marriage. These significant others were relating to the spouses on the basis of common stereotypes and perceptions. At the same time, these reactions invoked the acquaintance recognizing that their spouse cannot become independent by learning some basic skills and adaptive techniques to foster his independence. The respondents agreed that it was not until their spouse's recognized their ability to become self-ordinary and reliable did the development and focus of the relationship come to a mutual understanding. The significant others had to realize that they would have to eventually 'accept' the way a blind person may do things. And even though things could get a lot worse than what they eventually did, and though they could never get passed it, they 'managed to get by it.'

Intimacy in marriage: 'I should settle for what I can get.'

As a child grows, and matures, their power of abstraction increases and they are better able to symbolize, evaluate, and integrate or reject life experiences that can potentially bear their self-esteem and the life choices they make in life. The impact that parents have on their children can set the most important decisions they make in life. For some, parental impact can act as positive or negative reinforces. With the increasingly complexity of everyday life choices, the process of self-selection for oneself can become dependent on the impact significant others have had throughout their lives.

Mary and Gloria are two of the twelve respondents who share how their parent's

influences have affected the choices they have made in intimate relationships. In the following, both respondents explain it in greater detail. We begin to understand the process about the judgements they have made as a result of the influences their parents have had on their ability to make the right decisions in their life, particularly in the area of intimacy. Their responses show us that in many ways, our own self-worth and value not only becomes shaped, but is reflective of parental perceptions and judgements. We begin with Gloria's elaboration of the cause and effect their parents have had on the choices she has made with the men in her life. Gloria primarily focuses on the non-enduring relationship she had developed with her now ex-husband.

Going through a divorce changed a lot. It's been four and a half years. I guess I got into my first marriage having some sense that I should settle for what I can get. Some of it has to deal with my disability, and some of it, has to do with my upbringing, you know with my parent's negative attitude. They'd always tell me to settle for anyone I could get because it's quite unusual for a man to want to date a blind woman. My marriage was a common one. It was difficult to strike a balance of things I can and cannot do. If I'm married he's my helper. And some husbands become caregivers and sometimes I felt smothered by him, and people would say, 'doesn't he take good care of you. You're so lucky he married you, it's not every man who wants a blind woman.' When we shopped together I felt like a burden because the dog would get in people's way. He'd often tell me, 'why bring the dog, I'm here for you, leave him at home.' My husband would really get annoyed at almost everything I did. Little things where I'd take extra time, he'd get annoyed, like making a cup of coffee, or answering the telephone. I had to deal with negative attitudes from society, at least my husband should be able to understand. But he never did in all the years that we were married. It was always about what I didn't do right. He made me feel like my mother would, helpless, stupid, and worst of all disabled. When I look back I didn't see myself as disabled. If I took the extra two minutes at the cash register, so what! I accommodate to other people too, but he never saw it that way. I guess I took a chance when I decided to marry him. I thought I wouldn't find anyone better, and that I should hold on to this one while he was still around. My mom's paranoia really got to me, to the point where I actually believed her and went along and married this jerk. She made it seem like I was never going to get be genuinely happy, and she was right until the day I decided to call it quits. It wasn't a marriage made to happen. It took a long time before I realized that!

-Gloria 39 years-

Like Gloria, many other children sometimes feel parental attitudes play a major role in their life endeavors, or realizations towards life in general. In the above, Gloria admits that the decision to get married became effectively a choice that was somehow evoked by the influence of her parents, in particular the beliefs pronounced by her mother dearest. Although Gloria was uncertain about the relationship with her ex-husband, she sought no other alternative but to marry him. This decision came as a result of her mother's increasing effort to convince her that she should consider herself lucky to even have found someone who would want to marry her.

Gloria's comments indicate what may happen in a relationship where one party is blind while the other is not. From her own experience she admits that sometimes the visually impaired may feel like a 'burden' to their spouse. From Gloria's example we learn that the non-visually impaired spouse may feel that normal daily routines such as making a cup of 'coffee' may be seen as a long process. What others like Gloria might say is that if we should have to 'accommodate' to the needs of others, while can't they accommodate to the needs of the visually impaired.

Mary can relate to Gloria's detailed accounts in the above. She recalls her mother's constant nagging about men who avoided visually impaired women. In sum, she basically encouraged Mary to believe that the blind should 'stick to their own kind.' Unfortunately, this constant non-supportive environment encouraged Mary to believe in her own mother's beliefs and let the process of internalization begin. Like Gloria, Mary's mother provided her with a sense of purposelessness when it came time to talk about affection and intimacy with the opposite sex. Mary explains it best:

I don't feel like I'm a whole person. Particularly, when it comes to guys. Like right now, there's no one in my life, and I would like there to be, but again, that may have to do with more self-esteem issues. It's been like that for most of my life. Again, I think I've had trouble with getting closer because of how I was brought up. My mom would always tell me that men wouldn't want to get close to me unless they were also visually impaired. And for a long time I believed that because I had never met a couple before where the guy had all of his sight, and the girl was visually impaired. The blind normally stick to their own kind. I believed it for so many years and I know I may have missed getting to know some really nice guys. In high-school and Cegep, I was always afraid to get close to boys. Why would they want to be with a visually impaired girl? I don't feel the same today cuz I've been in relationships where he wasn't blind. I just wish my mom hadn't told me what she did many years ago. What an awful thing to say to your daughter. She ruined so much for me, my chances, and my perception on how guys liked girls.

-Mary 37 years-

The self-fulfilling prophecy becomes evident through Mary's experience.

Significant others' opinions affect us most when making our life choices. Mary explains that not speaking to the opposite sex was the result of being constantly told that a non visually impaired man would never want to date a visually impaired woman. Internalizing these attitudes for so many years lead to the development in the belief that she should in fact stick to her own kind. As a result, this infringed on her rights to develop communicatively with classmates of the opposite sex, which eventually may have led to the formation of intimate relationships.

Relationship based on acceptance: 'He treated me as a person, and not one with a disability'

Yet others reveal that a relationship based on respect and understanding completes and recognizes the individual with a visual impairment. This kind of relationship can facilitate the necessary life skills that foster independence, and the ability to become the recipients of personal integrity and worth. Valerie and Kevin help us understand that even within the complexity of dealing with a visual impairment, the comfort of a significant

other's attributes and acceptance of their disability contributes to a lasting, and happy relationship.

It's difficult for some people to understand that I have husband and four children... I was happy, and of course, in the beginning surprised to know that my husband understood me as a person, and not as a blind person. From the beginning of our relationship, he treated me as a person, and not one with a disability. Of course, when we first began dating, he asked me the 'what should I do's.' You know, like he asked me how he should hold me if we were to cross the street together, yadda yadda. You know the important things that would help him and I get better adjusted to each other's limits. We both know we wanted to have children. Not so many in the beginning, and today we have four beautiful children. My husband is wonderful, and I really can't complain. I used to think when I was younger that no one would ever want to marry me because of my blindness. But as I got older, and started hanging out with guys and girls my whole self-concept changed. I felt different, like dating and being in relationships could become possible. I don't want to say I was lucky that my husband came around because that would make him seem like the exceptional 'prince charming.' I'd like to think that I was of course fortunate to find him, but that I could have also met someone else who would accept me, and love me for me, and not want to be with me because they felt sorry for me.

-Valerie 42 years-

I'm married today. She's the best, and I consider myself very lucky to have her. We have a great relationship, and I wouldn't trade her in for anything. It wasn't so easy after high-school, but it got better with time. Of course, there were the girls who were nice to me cuz they felt sorry for me. And then there were the mean ones who were straight up with me and said they wanted to have nothing to do with a blind guy. I don't know if that was better than having them feel sorry for me. I really hated the ones that had pity for me. That was the worst. But anyway, all turned out well, I met my wife, and she didn't see how my disability could affect our relationship. She didn't see me as dysfunctional. She tells me she looked at what was in the 'inside that counts.' Soon after we were dating we got married. We like to travel a lot, it's our passion. She's the guide, and I'm the storyteller.

-Kevin 41 years-

Last but not least, intimacy. I am now in a common law relationship and my wife, and myself are scheduled to get married once my health will permit it. Since 1989, when I lost my sight, I dated 4 women, including my wife seriously. I would have to say that the relationships did not have anything to do, or not to do with my blindness. In between these, there were women who could not handle the situation and would either tell me straight up, or make up the 'nice guy excuse.' This in itself is not negative, but to say that my blindness had nothing to do with it would be false... Today, my wife, and step-daughter have completed my life. My most important goal for the future is to grow.

-Nelson 31 years-

'Stick to your own kind': 'Disabled should go out with other disabled'

The two respondents below share their personal experiences of dating in adulthood. These relationships have helped them mature in their judgement to better able evaluate and integrate those life experiences that potentially bear upon self-esteem. From them we learn that enduring relationships are more likely to develop when people relate to others with whom they agree. Part of their self-evaluation process was to be able to see themselves as others did not see them.

In addition, they describe how others have viewed relationships where one of the parties is visually impaired while the other is not. And for some, the so called public perception of the blind's sexuality makes them laugh. Fortunately, today, their self-esteem has more potency to realize that exclusively the public's personal attitude toward blindness should not get in the way of what kind of relationships they wish to maintain. Helen and Melissa describe their experiences below.

People have this funny idea that I haven't had any non-disabled intimate relationships with people. When I used to be on dates with non-disabled men, I used to get, 'It's so nice of you to go out with her.' I was dating one severe alcoholic that had way more problems than me. I have to say that I've been in different types of relationships where they weren't always so good. More bad than good actually. I was dating this one guy with muscular dystrophy. He had many problems in mobility. The relationship involved way more dependency on his part, and lacked privacy. So being blind is really relative. It has it's frustrations but things could be way worse. I remember having to clean his bum after he'd finished having a number two because sometimes he couldn't lean forward do it himself. That relationship didn't last too long, not because of his disability, it had to do with our relationship. We realized we weren't connected to each other. We were very different, and just started seeing things differently... I've also heard people say that the disabled should go out with other disabled. I've been outspoken about the whole damn thing, and have asked people, 'it's partly why?' And some have answered me with, "it's important to stick to your own kind." People are surprised when the blind have children

of their own. They picture you as a defected model, you know obviously based on ignorance. I've heard some of my own family members say that blind parents and children don't go together. I feel that every time I've dated a non-disabled man, I've had to justify my relationship to people who we meet on the streets, and some members of my family, when it really isn't any of their business in the first place.

-Helen 35 years-

That's an interesting topic to discuss about. It's funny because I've heard the rumor that the blind are not great lovers. And that has to be the stupidest thing I've heard up until now. I have a great sense of touch, and I've been told that I'm good with exactly what I won't say. I'm getting embarrassed now, but really men have told me this... Good looking men don't escape me. I don't shy myself away from them. Just because I'm blind doesn't mean I'm not beautiful. I keep telling myself, 'why can't I wake up with Enrique Iglesias all the time?' I've never seen his face, but his voice just turns me on. I know he's gorgeous. I became infectious with him. Did I tell you I almost met Ricky Martin in Mexico? He's another hottie... I don't see why I should hide myself from guys. I consider myself a mature and beautiful woman. I don't think that my blindness should prevent me from dating or becoming intimate with a man I fall in love with. I haven't had the best relationships, but they've been more good than bad. I think it's all part of a learning. You know, you take from each, so I don't let it get to me. I just hate it when people tell me to stick to my own kind. Like it's my duty to find a blind man. They automatically think that I can't, or shouldn't even attempt to date men who are not visually impaired. That really makes me laugh, and pisses me off actually. Who are they to tell me who I should and should not date. I don't let it get to me, although sometimes it can be frustrating when I hear one my aunts tell me, 'aren't there nice boys at the blind school you volunteer in?'

-Melissa 23 years-

Helen and Melissa describe similar views on how others who surround them view the romantic relationships they have had, or will have. Both the respondents have discussed that others have told them to 'stick to their own kind'. This implies that they should have romantic relationships with other people who have a visual impairment. Both interviews claim that the family and friends believe that they shouldn't even 'attempt' to date anyone else that does not fit into their category. Helen brought up the important point that sometimes family, friends, and even the general public feel that a non-visually impaired person who is romantically involved with someone who has a visual impairment,

is carrying on with the relationship from the goodness of their heart. As she recalls, she used to hear a lot of, 'Oh it's so nice of you to got out with her.' Despite the many influences located outside there circle of friends and family that can easily affect their dating choices. There is the ability to relate themselves in relationships in a positive manner. These comments have not in the long run negatively influenced either of them in their perception of who they should date.

Helen made another important point: some visually impaired may view blindness as relative compared to other more serious diseases. For instance, Helen shared her example of dating someone with muscular distrophy. Although she shared with him an empathetic understanding for living with a disability, she admits that she cannot relate to it's level of measurement. She confesses, 'He had many problems in mobility. The relationship involved way more dependency on his part, and lacked privacy. So being blind is really relative.' Although an understanding of the public's perception concerning this subject is greatly needed, there are many provocative notions that people generally tend to hold on to the subject of the visually impaired and dating. And as Helen suggests, 'it really isn't their business in the first place.' And why should dating be prevented, as Melissa simply puts it, "just because I'm blind, doesn't mean I'm not beautiful."

'Can I raise children as well as sighted parents?': Concerns and Questions.

Part of the self-evaluation process involves the tendency to find themselves in another's perspective. Significant others' judgements about our own ability to conceptualize our own possibilities can become increasingly effective in the concerns and choices we reference for ourselves. In the following, Doug describes the rewards of being

in an intimate relationship, along with the emotional concerns that come with it.

I am engaged to be married so this should tell you something about the success of dating, but I'll be happy to tell you more from my own experience in relationships, being blind really doesn't make a whole lot of a difference, it's what is in your heart that really counts in a relationship, as in most other things. Sure it wasn't easy before meeting my fiancée but things got better when she became part of my life. She accepted me for who I am, and not for my disability. She said it never became an issue for her because she saw past my blindness. But before our relationship there were others and their were obvious questions, like, 'how do blind people kiss,' can be answered very simply, and even not need to be asked if the questioner thought about doing it with their eyes closed, all things are possible with a bit of ingenuity. There are many emotional concepts that have to be thought about when entering a relationship and when such a relationship is serious, like in my case, when you are planning for marriage, there are things like how can I support a family? Can I raise children as well as sighted parents, and these issues can be solved with again, ingenuity and hard work... I think some people always try to look at it from the sighted person's point of view in the relationship. What about the blind person's side? It's not only hard for the sighted in the relationship, but hard for people like us. We have to refit ourselves to meet up with some of their expectations. So it's not only difficult in their part, but in our part as well.

-Doug 19 years-

Although Doug is not the only one in a serious intimate relationship, he expresses results of pertaining to certain decisions he must make with his partner as a result of being blind. For Doug certain questions arise such as, 'can I support a family?' He firmly attests that not only is it difficult for the 'sighted' in the relationship, but that it can become difficult in part from the 'blind person's side?' In order to have greater potency towards a closer relationship, Doug mentions that it can sometimes mean that the visually impaired may have to 'refit' themselves to meet up to the 'expectations' of their partner.

'Whenever you're on a date with me, you're always on a blind date. ': General comments about the experiences of intimacy.

The following respondents share their own views about how they've perceived their own experiences of intimate relationships. More specifically, they share their own

wishes for future relationships of intimacy.

Like I've mentioned to you before. I've had women give me the nice guy excuse. You know, they would say the relationship wouldn't work because we have different interests, you know the kind of bullshit they throw at you before dumping you. And I know that some of them really couldn't handle the situation, the fact that I would never get to see. I know my blindness definitely has a major role in it.... Today, my wife and step-daughter have completed my life. My most important goal for the future is to grow.

-Nelson 31 years-

My relationship with girls hasn't really changed much. I'm still shy, but cegep has really helped me out a lot in terms of getting to know girls. It's different from high-school. Girls and guys are always mingling. I've also met a lot of them, and have become friends with many through the different school organizations that I belong to on campus. I'm really busy, and haven't taken the opportunity to date that much. But I feel more confident about myself. I've got a great personality. Of course, I know that some girls may prefer not to go out with me because I can't see, but that's okay. Everybody has their preferences, just like I have mine. Eventually, I would like to settle down with someone from my own cultural background. Umh, well, what's kind of funny is that you know whenever I'm with girls, or I have a girlfriend or something, I've had a few girlfriends before actually, I tell them, 'whenever you're on a date with me, you're always on a blind date.' That's the humor, that's what I want to sign off with, and I hope you think it's funny.

-Patrick 18 years-

In the above, Nelson and Patrick describe the above as learnt experiences. Like Nelson, it may very well be that sometimes the visually impaired are often confronted with those who are direct and state that they wish not to be in a relationship with someone who is blind. Or, there will be other times where people will use the 'nice guy excuse' in order to deliberately avoid confronting the issue that they are not interested in getting romantically involved with a visual impaired person.

Although Patrick is not in a romantic relationship, he admits that cegep opened the doors to communicating with the opposite sex. Even though like many others, Patrick realizes that girls may not be interested in settling down with someone who has a visual

impairment. He understands their decision, as he also has his own expectations for his future. Patrick admits that he would eventually like to find a significant other from his own cultural background. From the above respondents we learn that some visually impaired may be faced in romantic situations where others may decline any form of intimacy based on external appearance, rather than internal qualities.

Concluding Remarks

This part of the chapter dealt with difficulty in dating during the teenage and adult years. In highschool dating becomes difficult as the visual impairment becomes apparent as the external quality that sets the border for making it more difficult for the formation of any relationship, let alone a romantic one. This external quality is openly visible and their differences affect the other's impression of him or her. The respondents experiences indicate that this physical attribute may be an obstacle in the primary stages of establishing an intimate relationship.

During the adult years, however, respondents dated more frequently. Some relationships lead to marriage while others did not. Relationships that did not last were mainly due to the respondent's visual impairment. Two of the respondents who were married reported difficulty in their marriage at the onset of their blindness. Their spouse's role somehow turned into that of a 'caretaker.' This discouraged them from re-organizing their life skills in order to become independent once again. It was only once the spouses realized what they were doing did they become counter-productive in having a successful marriage.

We also learned from two respondents that sometimes parental attitudes could

easily influence our judgement and decisions. In their cases, parental attitudes swayed the choices they made in intimate relationships. In Gloria's case, her parents often told her to 'settle for anyone' she could get. As a result, that it just what she did, and unfortunately realized that it was the biggest mistake of her life. As she states, 'I took a chance.' Like Gloria, Mary also expressed specific expressions that her mother often shared with her. For instance, she remembers her mother having told her to 'stick to your own kind.' This in plain means that the 'blind normally stick to their own kind.' Mary recalls this being one of the single most reasons why was always afraid to get close to boys and men.

We also learned from the respondents that not in all cases are intimate relationships negative. As we heard from Valerie, relationships that are based on understanding, and that recognize that the visual impairment is not an end in itself. These relationships can help foster the blind to become independent. Valerie states it best, 'my husband is wonderful, I can't complain.'

Some of our respondents have also shared how public attitudes towards their relationships can be incredibly judgmental. Public attitudes can strongly be influential. As Melissa suggests, the public feels 'it's my duty to find a blind man.' Other respondents expressed the concerns attached to being in an intimate relationship. For instance, Doug's worries centered around areas of raising and supporting a family. He often questioned what many other blind parents also question, such as, 'can I raise children as well as sighted parents,' or 'how can I support a family?' These are questions that many people in Doug's situation may have concern over.

Other respondents like Nelson and Patrick help us understand that there will be

individuals who may very well be up front and explain that it is not in their interest to date someone with a visual impairment. These confrontations may be experienced by many visually impaired people. Some may take this sort of confrontation to a negative level while others may not. For instance, Patrick explains that all individuals have their own preferences in who they decide to date. His own preferences suggest that he would later on like to settle down with someone from his own cultural background. There may be some visually impaired who may take this in a positive way while others may not.

So far, the respondents have chronicled in detail about three areas of their life in which people have reacted to their condition. The next chapter will describe their reactions in other arenas of their life: employment discrimination and general public maltreatment.

CHAPTER 7

EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION AND PUBLIC TREATMENT

This chapter will focus predominantly on the respondents' experiences at the workplace, and among the general public. The legally blind normally attract sympathetic reactions from people, however, in some cases, my respondents have been testimonies where strangers have strongly reacted towards their visual handicap in a negative way . This chapter will then lead to a discussion of how people have coped with those who Goffman calls "normal" and the new 'Disability' theorists call the problem.

Employment Discrimination

Having a visual impairment is not a bonus in our appearance-oriented world, especially in the area of employment where one will often be hired for one's image as much as one's work-potential skills. Therefore, it is not particularly surprising to hear that some of the respondents experienced various forms of discrimination during employment status. In this particular case, discrimination refers to both the hiring bias and differential treatment in the work environment. The following respondents share their accounts of employment discrimination.

'I suppose you'll always be late.' : *Discouraging employers*

There are many things that help discourage us from applying to certain jobs, or keeping our current positions for that matter. Having a visual impairment can especially add to the stress of seeking for employment. For people who are visually impaired,

seeking employment is especially difficult since their physical appearance plays a role in the manner in which employers regard them. The following respondents expressed feelings of frustration and hurt as employers continuously stressed their limitations while overlooking their abilities. They give you every excuse in the book, except they fail to explain that your visual impairment is the main reason for the prejudice they endure.

In the following, Kevin and Deborah elaborate on their experiences when employers have in the past used excuses in order to avoid hiring them. In worst cases, experiences such as these can help explain why some visually impaired individuals dread the task of searching for employment as they fear being shunned and rejected again. These experiences may also motivate others like Kevin to find employment in an organization that specifically deals with a visually impaired population.

I found that when looking for a job was very difficult. Nobody wanted to hire a visually impaired person. The questions were: what happens if you fall? How are you going to find the dining room? I don't have staff members to take you to the bathroom. How are you going to be able to get to work? I suppose you'll always be late. How can we teach you the job when you can't see to learn? What about my insurance? I'm not covered for a blind person. I'll lose my shirt if you have an accident. You know, there's no way for advancement here. The list never ends... When I started my first jobs, I always did something to get myself fired. In a drug store having problems seeing the wheels on the price machine, I marked shaving cream at 99 cents per can rather than \$1.99. It was only a one that turned into a zero but it got me to lose my job. Meanwhile, we sold every can of shaving cream in the store. In a shoe store, I put the wrong price on a rack of ladies shoes. The manager was wondering how I got rid of so many shoes that evening. When he saw the sign, I was fired again. I admit, I've had not the best jobs in the past, but I've had the worst kind of experiences. Whenever I was hired, I didn't really feel like they wanted me in the first place. I felt like they already had in mind how long I was going to last, and then find a good reason to fire me. It's as though they wanted to show me they gave me a chance, and it didn't work out. These experiences are what motivated me to work in organizations that help my kind of people. I presently work for an organization dealing with the visually impaired population and I am teaching computer access. That is, I train blind people to use computers that talk. I have been doing this for 11 years. I began to look for other things when electronic instruments

started to take a share of the market and also the economy made it such that people were tuning their pianos less often. Most of my life I have been working as a volunteer for various organizations mostly in fund-raising. I am also on the board of directors of two organizations dealing with the blind population in Montreal and Quebec city. Summing it up, I don't get much rest.

-Kevin 41 years-

It's difficult to apply. They normally say we're not having any special projects. I want the job because I know I'm qualified for it damn it. These attitudes come from major organizations. It's a losing battle so I quite before I see it to the end. It's so hurtful to think an organization or company seems much bigger than me. ... They normally give me you know a lame excuse for why they're not hiring me... I think we find prejudice in the job market. In job searching, it's just terrible. I need to work, so I don't go on welfare. It would be interesting for them to get adaptations to their work spaces. Most of the time, they see you as being blind, and not as someone who's capable of doing the job. I've applied for jobs because I know I'll be good at them. And on some of my applications I don't on occasion check off the box which asks whether I'm disabled. I know they have a right to know, but I often feel that when I do check off they don't call me. And when they do call me, I feel it's because they want me to know they've given me a chance. They're doing it out of self-pity. I just know. It really gets to me and discourages me from applying to other jobs. I just hate getting rejected time and time again.

-Deborah 44 years-

'I feel I don't get respect': Employer and Colleague conflict.

Once people with legal blindness overcome the obstacle of getting employed, they face with having to cope with disrespecting and derogatory comments made by colleagues. As the following respondents recount some of their experiences, they have gone through various accounts of degradation, humiliation, and hurt by their colleagues. They have received rude and disdain comments by colleagues as well as employers. In some cases, they were also told that there would be no ultimate opportunity for a promotion or advancement for someone in their condition. Although these experiences can generate the move toward quitting, for some respondents like Melissa, it gives them the will power to 'never let other people's comments get in the way.'

Bailey agrees with Melissa. Even though he was already a retired pilot prior to becoming blind, it did not stop him from getting involved with the municipal government in establishing policies that are there to help the visually handicapped population. He admits that at first he was hesitant about joining the team but then realized that they needed someone like him to 'show them the way.' Bailey believes that attitudes are barriers that may impede on the visually impaired's chances from 'climbing the ladder.' As Bailey best puts it, we must get past the assumption that the blind are completely 'dysfunctional.'

Where I work there's a negative attitude that goes on. There are three of us who are legally blind and it's been made very clear that we're not going to climb up in that organization. It's just not going to happen they said. I've had an employer tell me that no one wants a blind woman to deal with their children's life choices. Trying to change things in there won't happen. Why are some environments more open than others? I feel I don't get treated with respect. I find that my colleagues and employers feel sorry for me instead of realizing that I'm a professional at what I do. They see the impairment and not the talent. It's hard to deal with that. I know that some are just not aware that blind people can be as productive as sighted. It's ignorance! They don't know enough about people like us, and so they judge us for what we can't do.

-Gloria 39 years-

I live with a disability but it does not rule my life. I know my limitations, but I know how to work around it. I'm a professional at a bank. And I'm also a professional dancer. I know that sometimes my colleagues don't take me seriously. Some of them can actually be quite rude with me. I've already heard that I'm not moving up the ladder cuz I won't be able to handle what the next step has to offer. They seem to think that I'm some of kind of incompetent brainless twit who can't work just because I'm blind! ... I've worked in Mexico for a year and ran a radio show. That was such a good experience. I was never afraid to go out there and do what I wanted to do. I never let other people's comments get in the way of what I want to do. Did I say I also worked for the Canadian Council with Disabilities, the CCD. I want to be able to work outside so that I could expand on my knowledge. By outside I mean, in organizations that don't necessarily deal with visual impairment. I want to remain in contact with these places, but I want to be able to learn more from the outer society. That's why I'm doing my masters in communications right now.

-Melissa 23 years-

Like I told you before, I'm a retired pilot. I couldn't fly a plane anymore. I couldn't drive a car anymore either. This was a dreadful blow to me, especially not being able to drive anymore. Obviously, I had to turn in my license. I couldn't go back to doing things with my stamps, although I learned how to cope with that because I have many friends in the stamp club that are helping me by using their imagination. With their descriptive narrative they're able to tell me what's what, and I continue to a certain point. Now that I'm retired, I'm very much involved in the community. I've been involved in the challenge of dealing with a bureaucracy of municipality of getting them to install delayed traffic lights and bells and whistles on lights to enable not only blind persons but people on wheelchairs and young mothers with their babies on strollers to cross roads without the feeling that they would be endangering their lives. At first, I felt they were a bit hesitant about accepting me into their team. But eventually they realized that they needed someone who was visually impaired to show them the way. Because I'm blind I could tell them what visually impaired people really need done around the city. I think on the workforce there's the misconception that just because you're completely dysfunctional which some of us know is not the case. Attitudes like these ones prevent many visually impaired from climbing the ladder, worse, it prevents them from evening getting into the front door.

-Bailey 62 years-

'The work environment has to follow the needs of the blind people': Adapting the work environment to the needs of the visually impaired.

From the respondent's above, we learned that their visual impairment may have induced disrespectful behavior from others. To add to the already amounted stress, the conditions and organization of their work environment make it all the more difficult to adapt to working conditions.

It's difficult for people to understand that I work, and earn a good salary, and that I manage with cooking and taking care of my household. It's hard for people to understand this, but it really is my quality of life. ... Employers need to understand that there should be a follow-up to maintain with your employees. You need a follow-up to maintain a job. You need special attention, and constant positive relations at work if you're blind. For instance, I started in this new job a year ago. So far, I've been implemented into four different programs. There are four different teams at my work and when I arrive I have to deal with the people to explain to them what I had to do. I found that you have to help to maintain the quality of your own work cause you have to deal more about that. And that doesn't exist right now. There is nothing about that. There's a lot to do about that right now. It's a big problem right now. My boss hasn't really met with me often to ask me if I need something that would help me better adjust to the

workplace. I could think of several different things that would make things easier for people like me. For instance, they should have sensitization workshops on disability issues. Getting others to understand the needs of people with disabilities is important for a workplace. The work environment has to follow the need of blind people. Cause sometimes when you're blind there are restrictions about the opportunities you can do. For instance, an employee who isn't blind may take 30 minutes to write a report, while you take 30 minutes longer than the one who could see. There's an evaluation for that. And they give a subvention for that employer and there is a follow-up for that. They need to follow-up with the employer to keep doing the good job. You can do a lot, but the restriction is there and you need to think about your future all the time. Employers need to understand that you can't always move around all the time like sighted people. When you're experiencing difficulties in you're job, it's not because of your disability. It's because there are certain things that are not working in your favor. It's not your fault you can't move as fast, your opportunities become restricted, there are many restrictions in the location of your work area. We need the help of our employers to work with us constantly to try and make our work environment more manageable.

-Valerie 41 years-

In the above, Valerie describes the problems she has encountered in the labor force because of the lack of attention employers pay to employees with a visual impairment. As mentioned in the above, “employers need to understand that there should be a follow-up to maintain with employees.” Employers should be more sensitive to the work needs of disabled employees. Valerie stresses that the work environment has to follow the needs of people with disabilities. This is certainly eloquent and poignant. But it is doubtful that employers would agree. From her own experience, she states, “My boss hasn't really met with me often to ask me if I need something that would help me better adjust to the workplace.” Unfortunately, employers do not have to ‘follow the needs’ of others with so many handicaps everywhere. This conflict of interest has to be negotiated. Helen is one of those working in that area.

I work in an in an established company as an instructor who conducts sensitization workshops on disability issues. I've created programs to help adapt training for people who are deaf, visually impaired, or on a wheelchair. These type of workshops are

carried through on a regular basis throughout the year, and cover a range of different topics. The aim is to increase awareness in training people with disabilities, and for making others who are not disabled aware of important issues making it a friendly-adaptable environment for people with disabilities. I've learned through my experience at work that some people are always preoccupied with what I can't do. Some have projected what they feel and say how I should feel too. Assumption in that context can be handicapping in the employment sector. Attitudes change with pity, big time. I know it may be a normal human reaction but it's not helpful. Pity may become too maternal or paternal, and infantilizes. That's why companies, and all work environments must have sensitivity and awareness education. Public awareness is very important. It's like learning proper etiquette.

-Helen 35 years-

Helen's work on sensitivity training and increasing public awareness and the work of others has seemingly had a massive impact in today's labor force. Not only was Valerie hired (as she might not have been fifty years ago), but Gloria exemplifies with her experiences with a remarkable dance instructor.

Once I became blind my husband didn't want me working anymore. To tell you the truth, I didn't want to go back either. I concentrated mostly on getting my life back together. That took a very long time. I wanted to learn everything so fast, but I learned that it couldn't be that way unless I was superwoman. ... A few years after I had learnt enough to do things on my own, I decided to take up dancing. At first, my dance instructor was worried about me joining the group. She told me she didn't want me getting hurt because I had no vision at all. She told me, 'it's a whole new world here, are you sure you want to be part of it?' My dance instructor worked one on one with me. And that of course helped a lot. I had classes 3 hours a day five times a week. In some way it felt like I was going to work. I think a lot of time blind people don't last in the real world because employers don't work one on one with them enough. A week's training is not enough. We need extra special attention. All employers should meet with their staff on a regular basis to get feedback on how things are like, 'it is really working for you,' or 'what can we do to make things better at work?' It's important to establish these kind of policies. I hear stories from my other visually impaired friends who say that they only meet with the employer once while they're working there. The next time they meet, the employer gives them a sympathetic excuse, like, 'I don't think it's working out well for you here... yada yada yada. '... I guess I may have experienced this too if I were in the workplace.

-Gloria 39 years-

Although Gloria has experienced a positive and professional relationship with her

dance instructor, she admits, “I think a lot of times blind people don’t last in the real world because employers don’t work one on one with them enough...we need extra special attention.” Despite the efforts from the labor force, Valerie contends that employers still have not respected established policies that are intended to ameliorate the working conditions of the visually impaired and other able-bodied groups.

The above examples illustrate the vulnerability of the legally blind population. They are often mistreated and given differential treatment because of their visual capacity. Through the respondents detailed accounts we come to comprehend that employers and colleagues are not understanding of their disability. However, it would also appear that the experiences of the two sample members above, point out that there is a lack of concern in part by the organization and employer to consider the needs of the visually impaired population in their work environment. It may be especially more difficult for a visually impaired person to attempt to complete their task when they have not received the necessary means to help them adapt to the work conditions that are brought forth to them. For instance, as Valerie gave an example where it may take a visually impaired person longer to write a concise report. She mentioned that sometimes employers base their evaluation not only on the efficacy but the employees management time. They may fail to forget that a sighted person may very well complete a task much quicker than a non-sighted person. However, this is not to say that they can complete the task more efficiently.

There are many restrictions in a work environment that need to be adapted to the visually impaired population. Employers need to realize as Valerie best puts it, that ‘when

you're experiencing difficulties in your job, it's not because of your disability. It's because there are certain things that are not working in your favor.' Gloria also stressed the importance of having certain policies implemented in companies which means they should be strictly regulated. People with a visual impairment need 'extra special attention.' She also mentioned the importance of having constant meetings with your staff on a regular basis in order to receive the intake of feedback that could very easily be useful in the helping the worker accomplish their tasks more successfully, while having the necessary means of accomplishing the task.

As an instructor conducting sensitization workshops, Helen brings forth the importance of work environments to make the environment more adaptable. She claims that it can be 'handicapping' on the part of the 'employment sector' to eradicate the sensitivity and awareness of this issue. On the part of the employer's it like learning 'proper etiquette.'

*'I've learnt that life is not always about getting things done the easy way. ':
Reasons for having not experienced discrimination in the workplace.*

Valerie and Helen have both experienced problems in the workplace, and Gloria is well aware of them although she is no longer working. Others like Doug are not, as he is only starting out in the workforce.

I haven't experienced any discrimination in the workforce just yet. I haven't really ventured into the work world, but am hoping that once I finish up my degree in computer science to get a good job in the technology industry. I know it won't be easy getting a job out there, especially in my field, it's so competitive. There are so many bad viewpoints about the blind, such as they have to be dressed by others, they can't cook, clean, or basically do any regular activities that any one with a brain larger than a pin head can do. These activities even extend to personal hygiene, they think blind people have to be bathed, and washed by others. These kind of assumptions are often made by employers

themselves and help them decide whether they should hire people like me. It's not to say that all employers are a like, but there is a lot of discrimination out there.

-Doug 19 years-

Both Doug and Patrick are just starting out in the workforce, and expect to encounter some problems. Patrick also emphasizes that he may experience additional problems because he is not bilingual.

I'm not working right now. I'm on the board of several different committees in school, so that keeps me pretty busy. Although I know what's expected one I go out there. Some employers won't want to hire me because of my disability. People in general think that people with visual impairments and disabilities don't think that they produce much of good work. I just have to show them what I'm really capable of doing! I'll give them my 100 percent, and if I know they're still not satisfied then I know that they are the ones with the problem. My family has already warned me that it's not going to be easy. I know what to expect, but that won't stop me from working hard. Because of my disability I've learnt that life is not always about getting things done the easy way. So I definitely know what I'm up for.

-Patrick 18 years-

Nelson, like Patrick and Doug, has been a student most of his life. He has avoided the work-place discrimination along with Mary and Mark who both work for an organization specifically targeting the visually impaired population.

I'm not working right now. I'm presently in school completing a degree in chemistry. I've been in school most of my life since I became blind. It was hard proving to my professors that I could do it. And I know that when I attempt to enter the workforce, it's not harder. It doesn't help that some attitudes towards the blind are they cannot accomplish things on their own, or just simply that they cannot do certain things at all. Perceptions like these don't help people like me get hired.

-Nelson 31 years-

Now tell me why you think I'm so lucky well, whether it's because I'm partly, I don't know. I haven't visited out too far ya know. I've had a few crappy experiences, but that's probably not tons. But probably not that much because I haven't ventured out that far.

You see I work for an organization that deals with visual impairment.

-Mary 37 years-

I haven't really experienced much discrimination yet, and that's because I work in an organization dealing with the visually impaired. At the same time, I've been in school to perfect myself more on computers and maybe get myself ready to go back to work in high-tech companies. I know that it might be difficult to find employment as a visually impaired. I just wish employers and the rest of society would know that blind people although we cannot see, we can function very well and at times more efficient than sighted people. Employers get this idea that we're totally dysfunctional. I am not looking forward to the discrimination that I may encounter but know that it might be coming my way.

-Mark 45 years-

It would appear that the reason for which the respondents above have not experienced discrimination rests slowly on their relation of having worked in an environment that solely deals with the visually impaired population. For instance, Mary admitted, 'I haven't worked in organizations other than those that deal with visual impairment.'

Other interesting factors arose upon their discussion. It is quite evident that there is common concern over the idea that negative perceptions about the blind will provide negative feedback to employers who wish to hire them. As Doug clearly stated, 'perceptions like these don't help people like me get hired.' Employers can tend to base their assumptions on negative perceptions brought forth by other members of society. This in the long run may be difficult for visually impaired persons to demonstrate their established capabilities as a future employee of the company.

Another essential component that arose from their sharing, was the hardship they may be confronted with for the sole reason of having a physical attribute that distinguishes them, from what Goffman would say, the absolute 'normal.' In Patrick's discussion, he brought up the issue of possibly facing difficulty getting hired simply because of his visible

disability. 'Some employers won't hire me because of my disability,' says Patrick. Doug also points out, 'I know it won't be easy getting a job out there.' Experiencing difficulty in the educational sphere may ultimately provide a sense of what is expected from the outside world. Nelson admits, 'I had a hard time proving to my professors that I could do it.' Reassurance may not become as valid in a situation such as this, more so in a confrontation between a possible employer and employee. And even though as Patrick so likely stated, 'you give them 100 percent, and if they're not satisfied, then I know what the problem is.' Like the others above, Patrick definitely knows what he's up against.

Public Discrimination

All of the respondents reported unpleasant and offensive encounters with strangers. The responses ranged from verbal assumptions undermining their ability to function independently, to insulting and embarrassing moments, and physical acts of violence. In the following, all respondents discuss these distressful moments and how it has affected them. We begin with respondents sharing their views of how individuals in the public have perceived them as incompetent people with so little to offer.

'You know, I admire what you guys can do'

Six of the twelve respondents reported how the general public tend to view them as incompetent because of having a visual impairment. The sample members reported feelings of anger and frustration about the ignorance of people's views about the capability and functionality of the visually impaired population. Many of the respondents' experiences highlight the general public's view towards their level of competency. The six respondents share the common view of how the public measures their level of functionality

based upon negative attitudes and perceptions they hold of the visually impaired.

Yeah people in general think that people with visual impairments and disabilities don't produce much good work. We get recognized by people who are aware of our accomplishments. People who are aware have more positive attitudes towards people with a visual impairment. They know because they've heard that people with a visual impairment are capable of traveling and that they're determined. I tell people it's challenging. I've had people approach me not to help, but to compliment, or to comment about me. Some have said, 'you know I admire, what you guys can do, it's amazing how you guys could travel on your own.' Or they'll say, 'it's amazing how you guys can do certain things.' Those are the positive attitudes. People who are actually admiring you for what you can do, and I think that's great cause it makes me feel good too! It does make me feel really good. But sometimes, I feel as though they think we're all incompetent. We're not okay, and sometimes they need to be told that in the face.

-Patrick 18 years-

I went to school to pay my tuition. I of course, brought my cane. I can't see the # on the paper. So I had to ask someone what the number on my paper was. I asked her, just tell me where the sign is. She yells and says 'OKAY', give me your card. I was telling myself, why is she yelling I told her I was blind and not deaf. I can hear you for heaven's sake. It took her by surprise. I got the 'she's blind,' yeah but I can hear what you're saying. I don't know why people react that way but they do. Many people automatically think that my mother does everything for me, like my laundry, and cooking. Sorry to disappoint you but I do have other senses that make me functional, and not incompetent. Like my sense of touch makes me feel everything on my two feet. And that's another thing. Everyone always tells me that no one will ever marry me cuz they'll be too afraid. I can't stand when people don't understand myself or others in the same situation. We don't feel the need to change. I like me the way I am. I hate it when I hear, 'isn't there a cure?' If a cure was available I don't know if I'd take it. I like who I am, and I won't change for anyone but myself.

-Melissa 23 years-

Unfortunately, there are many bad viewpoints about blind people, such as they have to be dressed by others, they can't cook, clean, or basically do any regular activities that anyone with a brain larger than a pin head can do. These activities even extend to personal hygiene. They think blind people have to be bathed and washed by others. They make us feel like we are totally incompetent and useless, like it's the end of the world and we should give up cuz our lives are useless.

-Doug 19 years-

I think the problem is in the perception when I meet people damn it, it's difficult for them to understand I work, I have a good salary, or I could manage cooking, you know, or to have a good quality of life. When I meet people each day, I go out each day. I work and

study each day and I have to reassure the people. I mean I have to make people comfortable about my blindness cause they feel I have problems. For me its difficult. I can do things like them. It's true we have many obstacles. You have many things to do when you're blind. You have to adapt to many things. We feel very happy when someone seems to understand that we're a person first, and not blind. We need that but usually it's not the first perception. The first perception is that they feel you have difficulties because you are blind and you have to help them to feel comfortable about that. Each day you have to do that. And I imagine for my children and husband they must be tired having to explain to others that I'm a perfectly functional human being. A place that's less like that is university. When I explain something about my condition they understand that fast because they have the reflex to do things fast. Not everybody's like that. I'm generalizing. And it's because for me to go to a place like that I need that. And the place where I work right now it's the same. I feel they are very open to understand that and this has helped me deal with the rest.... I go to school for my child. They have the report card, and I have to go see the teacher with them. I arrive there, the teacher doesn't know what to do and 'where will she sit, give her a chair', tu tu tu, hey damn it, I feel like telling her at this point, 'I'm there for my child and that's it.' I understand that the teacher usually doesn't meet someone who's blind and for her it's a big step for a blind parent to go to school, you know, for me it's not, it's natural. After what she said, I have girls in the same class, twins. After I took my coat from my chair and I started putting it on wrong. And then the teacher said, 'oh wait a minute, I'll help you put on your coat.' And then she told my daughter, 'can't you help your mother, she's blind.' My daughter said to her, 'oh ya I know, but if she's able to cross the highway by herself, she can surely put on her own coat!' The teacher then said, 'oh that's true.' That's just a few of the things that I go through on a usual basis. I'm confronted with this each day in some way or another.

-Valerie 42 years-

Today when I go to restaurants with people, I feel like a burden. 'Gloria do you need any help with the menu?' Gloria here's your coke. I know they're trying to be helpful, but this makes me feel childish. I feel like I'm living with my parents all over again. I wish they could just have braille menus. And why don't they? Here we go again, we're not too important because we represent such a small percentage of the population.

-Gloria 39 years-

Interacting with people in public spaces has not been difficult at all. I am outgoing in the first place and people like me. So it makes it quite easy. The only two places that I found a bit difficulty is in the metro, bars and clubs because of the noise levels...but you know, I'm still confronted with these attitudes towards the blind. Some people think that I can't accomplish certain things on my own, or just simply that we cannot do certain things at all. For example, people still think that the blind cannot take care of children. Certain people are awestruck when I go to my daughter's school to pick her up by myself. They do not think that we can take care of children or even at times, ourselves because we are impaired. Sometimes I get the old pat on the back, and get told, 'I admire folks like you.

Can't see nothing at all, but you still manage to do things. You deserve a standing ovation my friend.' I don't need people's pity. I'm as capable of dealing with my own responsibilities as anyone else. Just because I'm blind doesn't mean I'm a complete useless idiot!

-Nelson-31 years-

Different themes arise from the respondents' sharing. One major theme was the public's underlying assumption that the visually impaired are dysfunctional when it comes to owning their responsibility. This may from doing one's own 'laundry' and 'cooking' to 'cleaning' or doing any 'regular activities.' It's difficult for the general public to view the visually impaired as being functional as any other sighted person. According to the above respondents, it's difficult for some people to conceptualize that blind persons can actually work, marry, and raise a family. As Valerie points out, 'It's difficult for them to understand I work, I have a good salary, or I could manage cooking, you know, or have a good quality of life.' If they are seen as having a standard life like the Jones's next door, they get comments like, 'it's amazing how you guys could travel on your own.' Although these comments could be encouraging and make the visually impaired feel really good, they could sometimes, as Patrick states, make them think 'we're all incompetent.' Comments like these can help undermine their abilities as functional people living an adaptable lifestyle.

The public's general views toward seeing the blind as incompetent could induce other possible reactions from the public and the visually impaired themselves. On the part of the latter, there is a constant need to provide the public with reassurance that they are 'functional.' For instance, Valerie points out, 'I have to reassure the people. I mean I have to make people comfortable about my blindness cause they feel I have problems. The

first perception is that they feel you have difficulties because you are blind and you have to help them to feel comfortable about that. Each day you have to do that.’

In other cases, the visually impaired may have to prove to others that they are indeed capable of maintaining a family of their own. For instance, Nelson points out in the above that certain people are ‘awestruck’ when they see him pick up his children from school. They do not think that a blind person can take care, or manage a family on their own. This can become disturbing for some families to deal with. As Valerie points out in the above, ‘I imagine for my children and husband that they are tired about that.’

Attitudes such as the above could evoke some visually impaired persons to feel as though they are burden to the rest of society. As Gloria mentioned earlier, sometimes the general public could make you feel like a burden. According to Gloria, they may want to seem helpful, but at the same time, they can make them feel ‘childish’ and ‘dependent’ on others to fulfill their own needs. This can become a nuisance as they already have their own daily difficulties and frustrations to deal with.

Eventually these type of perceptions can lead the public to treat them as though they are incompetent. When people begin to internalize their own beliefs they can reflect their perceptions in the matter which they communicate with the visually impaired. They may begin to see the visually impaired person not only with one disability but with other contributing ones. Most importantly, they may begin treating them as a non-able bodied person. In the above, Melissa gave the example, of how someone yelled out at her thinking that she also had a hearing disability. She recalls answering back and stating, ‘why is she yelling, I told her I was blind and not deaf. I can hear you for heaven’s sake.’ It can

be very important when the general public sees the visually impaired as a person and not as a disabled body. Using Valerie as a reference, she admits, 'we feel very happy when someone seems to understand you're a person first, and not blind. We need that but usually it's not first perception. The first perception is that they feel you have difficulties because you are blind... .' When people begin to treat others as though they are handicapped, they are undermining the able-body to produce and succeed at producing successful lifestyles.

'Watch out for the idiot,': Embarrassing moments

There may have been a certain occasion where we all may have been embarrassed at some point or another. The following two examples vividly illustrate some of our respondents' most embarrassing moments and the reactions the public has had towards them.

Once, I was walking on St. Catherine's street, I fell over a young boy without legs. He was low on the ground and was begging for money. I never saw him and fell over him knocking over his can of money and not being able to help him pick it up. That one really killed me. Another time, I knocked a little old lady to the ground with a full bag of fur coats I was carrying. I was working as a messenger delivering fur coats between Eaton's and the fur repair shop. My sight was pretty bad, and the driver of the car made me deliver the stock. I tell you I don't know how I ever got hired for this job. Anyhow, once I didn't realize the revolving door was so close to me so I bumped into it with my bag of fur coats. This sent the door revolving at great speed and shot out the lady in front of me. I remember hearing the driver shout out, 'watch out for the idiot.' I also remember listening to laughter in the background. There was this one voice that stood out from the others when it said, 'what are you blind?' I answered back to it and said 'Yes.' I didn't hear much laughter after that.

-Kevin 41 years-

I've had my share of embarrassing experiences. It's happened more than a couple of times. Sometimes I sit in front of the bus, and sometimes I assume no one is sitting where I usually sit. There were a couple of instances where there was actually a person sitting

where I usually sit, and I almost ending up sitting on their lap. It's funny but it's kind of embarrassing. Some people are not as considerate. But I just apologize and say I'm sorry, and they apologize too at least. I had this one guy push me roughly off his lap and call me a 'blind loser.' Other than that, I've never really had any negative experiences, ya know, that much cause since I've only lost my vision 7 years ago. I still have many decades ahead of me so come and ask me then, I'm sure there will be much more to share.

-Patrick 18 years-

From Patrick and Kevin's above responses we learn that although accidents may often happen to a blind person, it does not necessarily mean that people's reactions will be positive and supportive. Unfortunately, in the above cases, both Patrick and Kevin did not anticipate an embarrassing moment as they were going on with their daily rituals. As such, being called an 'idiot,' and 'loser,' only adds amount of pressure into being noticed as indifferent to the rest of those that surround you. Patrick is well aware that he may encounter moments that will provoke negative experiences with others. As he states, "I've only lost my vision 7 years ago. I still have many decades ahead of me then, I'm sure there will be much more to share."

Kevin and Patrick's experiences make us realize that even though moments such as these may be embarrassing and become self-destructive, it may beckon the sympathy of some, while entice ridicule and pleasure in others.

'You handicaps make the law now?': Discrimination is present in restaurants.

Two of the sample members experienced discrimination in restaurants. Their experience candidly reveals how visually impaired persons can blatantly and unknowingly expect to be confronted with maltreatment in places where they least would least expect discrimination.

I've been thrown out of restaurants because of the owners' unwillingness to accept guide dogs. I couldn't believe it, I was shocked. When I told him the law permits it, the waitress replied, 'you handicaps make the law now.' I called the police and left that place. God knows what they would have put in my food. Some owners forget that there are laws that have basic principles used to integrate disabled people into society. Access to rights becomes very important for people like me. It's implementation helps out a lot. And most often it's ignored, but it has improved. These incidents really made me feel like I wasn't important enough to be served at those restaurants. It didn't matter if they lost a customer, because I was surely not one they wanted to serve.

-Helen 35 years-

I got a guide dog once I lost complete vision. And I have to say that some degree of prejudice comes from ignorance. I've been turned down from restaurants. Bringing in a guide dog just doesn't meet up with their so-called image. I've been threatened to call the police on various occasions because of this. Those are the kind of places that I least expect to give me a hard time. I have to deal with enough shit on a daily basis, situations like these just make the day shittier. Am I not important enough for them to want me there? Do I not have the same money as everyone else? It just pisses me off to think of it.

-Gloria 39 years-

It is quite obvious from Helen and Gloria that situations such as these may instill the perception that visually impaired persons are not valuable enough, or are not an important asset to consider when disallowing them to eat at their restaurants. Even though Canadian law permits the use of guide dogs accompanying the visually impaired, they are still confronted by many owners and waitresses unwillingness to accept them as any other customer. This illustrates the malicious and uncaring remarks and behaviour the above respondents have endured. This kind of reaction also shows how some restaurant owners may simply lack the respect they should be equally giving to all of their customers.

'Pull me like a dog': Getting the wrong kind of help vs. getting no help at all.

All of the respondents reported at one time or another having unpleasant encounters with strangers on accounts of their visual impairment. From the respondent's below, we learn that even though the general public may try to be of assistance in aiding

them, sometimes they may be offering the wrong kind of help. And awhile some may help the visually impaired, others will not, or will care not to offer their help. Mark and Gloria explore these issues with us below.

In public, I think the two most biggest challenges are when someone is trying to help me but all they do is pull me like a dog everywhere. And the other is trying to get directions from people and the only way they would explain it would be with hand gestures. It's like hello buddy, don't you realize I can't see your hands. Another experience is when I would bump into someone and they would turn around and tell me to watch where I was going. At a social event, I just hate it when someone would come up to me and start a conversation with me and they wouldn't identify themselves. I find that through the years, it is getting more difficult to interact with people at a social gathering for a number of reasons. As mentioned above, some people come up to you and don't identify themselves. Another reason is with the decrease of my vision, the sense of hearing has developed much more. I have noticed that if there is a lot of noise in the background, I have a lot of trouble hearing a conversation that I may be having. There is also the fact that people bump into you and it is very easy to lose your sense of orientation.

-Mark 45 years-

The biggest challenge has to do with people and not the visual impairment per se. There are some demanding things, like at times, I ask for help during rush hour and people don't want to stop and help. I've often stood on sidewalks or in front of subway doors wanting to know where the bus is. And most often, I've had people not help because they think I was begging for money. Others have just pushed me away while they've run to catch their buses. I've fallen several times, and have been stepped on. I had one little girl help me up once. She apologized for her father and said it was an accident and that he didn't mean it. In the background, I heard her father say, 'come on, let's go, we'll miss our bus.' I thanked her and hoped that her father would learn from her. One day I got off the McGill metro station and asked for help to go up the stairs. I waited approximately half an hour before someone helped me. What makes me mad is that I do things at people's conveniences. When I know I have to get somewhere by metro, I give myself 2 hours, cuz I know I might encounter some of these difficulties. I have my guide dog, and sometime I hate it when people grab my elbow to cross the street. They think it's impossible to do it on my own cuz I can't see. I don't find people listen, and some just don't want to listen. I think that if you want to help, you've got to ask, and not impose. I've had people lift me up, and I've been pushed away cuz they think I want money, and that to that's insulting. Just because I'm blind doesn't mean I'm going to beg for money.

-Gloria 39 years-

I have 8 percent of vision only in one eye. People can't tell that I'm visually impaired. And when people see me with glasses they think something is totally wrong. So you know,

people tell me different things. I think because it's not too obvious to some people, so its very possible if I was totally blind and walking out with a dog, with a white cane, that I don't know how people, would have different attitudes towards me would be. I think I could get away with a lot . I think I could miss a lot of this crappy attitude. Now that I kind of have this big debate going on in my head a lot and I also talk to people about this, but I know people that are totally blind and sometimes they're quite bitter towards the quote on quote sighted ya know. And I haven't had the same terrible experiences and I'm very lucky.

- Mary 37 years-

People are not educated enough on what legal blindness means. They often associate blindness with someone using a white cane. They also think blind people could only see black. In reality, only one percent of the blind population sees total darkness. The other 99 percent do have a very tiny vision, some perception to process visual perception. It's funny, some people take my arm and bring me from one destination to the next assuming I need their help. They could at least ask.

-Melissa 23 years-

From the responses above, we learn that although at times the public does want to help a visually impaired person, they often may not be giving them the proper help they are in need of. For that matter, this may be done unintentionally. When Mark shared his biggest challenge, he admitted that it was 'when someone is trying to help but all they would do is pull me like a dog.' We learn from both respondents that in open spaces that require some form of assistance, the general public may be insensitive to the visually impaired needs. Sometimes, these experiences may be provoked by the public's lack of acknowledgment of the person's visual impairment. For instance, Mark has experienced on more than one occasion bumping into someone and would then receive comments like, 'watch where you're going.' In other situations, it can become difficult and uncomfortable for the visually impaired to be approached by someone who has not introduced themselves. It makes it difficult for them to know who they are socializing with. This may happen often with some individuals when they are unaware of the visually impairment.

Instances such as not identifying oneself to a visually impaired prior to commencing a conversation may make the talk seem strange, uncomfortable, and tense all at the same time. Scenarios such as these can trigger or persuade other visually impaired to give up on social gatherings. As Mark points out in the above, one of the reasons for this is that ‘some people come up to you and don’t identify themselves.’ Social gatherings can provide a background full of noise making it very difficult for the visually impaired to keep in tune with a conversation. Bumping into people, as Mark suggested can make it very ‘easy to lose your sense of orientation.’

We also learn that at times the public may not feel the obligation to help a visually impaired person when they are asked. As Gloria discussed in the above-mentioned quote, ‘the biggest challenge has to do with people and not the visual impairment per se.’ From her account, we understand that like Gloria, there may be some visually impaired persons who ask for help in public spaces and are rejected. As Gloria simply states, ‘people just don’t want to stop and help.’ For some visually impaired like Gloria, depending on other people for help might add to the additional strain of having to feel dependent on others. As Gloria points out, it made her feel like she’s had to ‘do things at people’s conveniences.’ As mentioned previously, such public reactions may be directly linked to the acknowledgment that people may not necessarily realize the person is visually impaired. As Gloria states, sometimes she’s been mistaken as someone begging for money. Confrontations such as these might be especially difficult for some visually impaired persons to handle.

In general, there is an important message that Mark and Gloria reveal through

their sharing. The public must realize that when confronting a visually impaired, they should identify themselves prior to starting a conversation. In addition, the public should ask the visually impaired person whether they need help getting from a certain location to the next. As Gloria strongly stated in the above, ‘ I don’t find people listen, and some just don’t want to listen. I think that if you want help you’ve got to ask and not impose.’ The communication must be made first with the acceptance of the visually impaired person. Initiating contact by suddenly grabbing a person’s elbow is not approving. The visually impaired person may have to also realize that certain public spaces call for a different type of setting. For instance, the subway may be a location where the visually impaired may less likely receive help. As Gloria has provided us, these spaces can unintentionally provide scenarios where the visually impaired may get accidentally pushed, or ‘stepped on.’

‘... a disaster when you’re talking about the public’: Acts of physical violence out in public.

All of the respondents reported some unpleasant encounters with strangers on various accounts associated with their legal blindness. These behaviours have ranged from open stares to verbal taunts. All of the respondents have shared that unlike verbal taunts, physical acts of violence would be worse to endure, as it would make them fear for their own safety. The two following respondents share their experiences of being targets of serious physical violence.

I had to learn very young to make myself be heard. This caused problems. I sometimes interrupted others to be heard. I got into a lot of trouble. I had to learn to be heard but not to be pushy. It took a long time and worked against me. I still have problems with that. I don’t want to get lost in the shuffle, but I have to be careful not to be too pushy or sound arrogant. This has got me into trouble in the past. I got into a fight with a complete stranger on the street once. I was in a shuffle and really needed to get by. So I

accidentally pushed him, and he took it really bad. He grabbed my shirt, and told me to calm down. He pushed me and I fell. This really nice lady helped me up. I don't even know if he realized I was blind.

-Kevin 41 years-

It's a disaster when you're talking about the public. The worse situation is the young people in high-school who live in the west-island. I live in the west-island. I could only talk about the west-island because that's where I travel to and from. I take the train and I've been knocked off the train, I've been pushed and shoved and so these people are kids from high-school usually private high-schools in the west-island . I've tried encourage those schools and organizations to educate them in a friendly way. Teach them that their could be obstacles for people like me when we have our white canes. My cane will tell me if there is an obstacle. It also tells you where the edge of the platform is. I'm not going to walk and fall in the tracks but when you've got 30 or 40 kids who throw their nap-sacs in the pile on the middle of the platform and then I can't get around them and then they see me coming and they play little stupid games like lets see if he can find how to get around them without being able to. I usually get there and I walk to a certain point. I use the pattern on the sidewalk of the platform. There are certain patterns to the bricks and the concrete and that tells me where I am and where I want to be when I get on the train. Most adults will help me get on the train and most kids swarm to the door and I get no help. I have to force my way in.

-Bailey 62 years-

It is quite clear from the respondents above, that the visually impaired may be susceptible for being targets of physical violence. It appears that physical violence may be endured by the visually impaired on account of their disability. Examples from the above-mentioned sample members have warranted special attention and concern for their safety out in public.

'What's standardized for the sighted is not for the blind': Unfriendly city infrastructure.

Through the years, our city has made a continuous effort to make the environment more eco-friendly for the visually impaired to adapt to. Despite the government's continuous concern, the visually impaired presently lack other necessary requirements to help them make use of public space, as many other people do. They continue to face

difficult hazards and challenges especially when traveling on their own in public spaces. As the respondents will discuss, it seems what is standard for the sighted, is not for the blind.

I've had a continuing challenge to being able to walk in the area where people on Mondays and Thursdays when garbage cans have been empty and thrown anywhere on the sidewalk or in the way of a person walking on the sidewalk. I have to know what to do so I don't step off the sidewalk and into the road and cause an accident to become part of an accident.

-Bailey 62 years-

It's so hard walking downtown. There's always construction going on. The roadblocks just drive me crazy, because there's no way of getting around it. Sometimes it means having to ask someone to help you find your way cuz you know no other way of getting to your destination. I've fallen into unknown pits, and then not being able to find a safe way to where I want to go. Not having these things tells me that I don't really count as a person, cuz I make up a small number of those people. Society is not interested in helping my kind of people, because we're such a small number out altogether. That really pisses me off, cuz how are we going to go on living our regular lives? They tell us to go out there and be independent, but they don't make things easy on us!

-Gloria 39 years-

I've realized that anything of close proximity to organizations that deal with the blind have and talking elevators in their building. And the building is normally covered with braille dots so that way we can make our way along the place on our very own. Sometimes they even have auditory traffic lights in the exterior to help people cross over with the street. But I've realized that what's standardized for the sighted is not for the blind. There are more and more ramped curves on small streets. They used to be put in a corner. Now I can't decide when the sidewalk ends. They were implemented for wheelchairs which is good, but it's been detrimental for the blind. Now they're putting lines to inform clients where the end of the sidewalk is. I hate snow removal days. It's so difficult for me to orient in the snow. There are no tactile points, and I can't always predict the level of snow I'm approaching.

-Helen 35 years-

It appears from the above sample members that it might be quite the challenge for some visually impaired persons to adapt to the city's infrastructure. The way certain parts of the city have been constructed has very well played an influence on the way the blind perceive and adapt to their own travel spaces. Although the blind may very well want to

initiate in outdoor public activities, they may be prevented from doing such exploration. This brings way for concern over what necessities the city should confront and deal with in order to enforce the city to be eco-friendly for the visually impaired and other disabled persons.

From the respondents, we learnt that construction sites and roadblocks can disorient the visually impaired's map of getting to a destination. This unknown hazard becomes of primary concern to the visually impaired as it can disorient them and have them become part of an accident or cause of one for that matter. For instance, as Gloria points out in the above, construction sites, and roadblocks have often made her fall into 'unknown pits.' Ramped curves can make it especially difficult for the visually impaired to walk from one end of a street to another. It can make it difficult for the blind to determine where the street actually ends. Although ramped curves were built to make it easier for the physically handicapped to access their wheelchairs, they have become a hazard to the visually impaired. As Bailey mentioned in the above, streets with ramps make it difficult for the blind to use their white cane. Snow banks could also be a dangerous hazard for the visually impaired. Unfortunately, there are no tactile points on the snow, and as Helen suggests, this cannot 'predict the level of snow' they are approaching.

The city's unfortunate tendency to adapt the environment to the needs of the visually impaired confirms that society may not be as candid in helping them. This makes it difficult for them to go about living regular lives. As Gloria states, 'they tell us to go out there and be independent, but they don't make things easy on us.' Many visually impaired may think that society is not interested in helping a group that makes up a small

percentage of the population.

'We've furnished them': Lack of government support.

One of the government roles is to serve it's own people with dignity and rights. Although, our government has in the past attempted to regain the trust of their people, their affiliates have failed to provide us with otherwise necessities. Through Valerie's quote we come to understand that what has already been done for the blind consists of only the minimum. This assumption moves us away from the current contributions they have made in the past, and what they fail to provide in the present.

Thankfully, braille is now not translated by hand, it's done by computer and it works out okay. The government now says, blind people are integrated and we have furnished them with computers. Okay, you have the computer and you could read braille and it talks to you when you start typing. And when you insert a diskette, the computer can now read to you what's on it. When you're a blind child they teach you braille very fast. They say, I furnished you with a computer, but the problem with insurance 'maladie' is that they cover the cost for your computer only once. They want you to have the minimum possible.

Like mine right now is a new one, and I've had to purchase it myself because the government didn't want to supply me with an updated one. My computer is 5 years old, it's very slow, it's a very bad computer, but they say you have the minimum and you have to deal with that. I can't tell you how many problems I've had with this old computer. The computer breaks down many times and you have to call the company in order to be considered. The company then must call your counselor. The counselor then has to call the companies and the company calls the counselor, and then the counselor calls you for an appointment, and then it can take many days to repair, and then you're running around all that time, and you wait and wait for something to be done. It really wastes your time. You lose a lot of time and sleep over it. I know of some other visually impaired students who are experiencing this right now. The problem is that the product is still not very well developed because we don't make up that many people in the society. We're just a few blind people in Quebec. And these type of computers are standardized in English, like my old computer. I've been doing my masters for the last 4 years, and I've never had any French accents in my computer. I've had to ask my husband to add the accents on certain words. Everything has to be re-read!. These type of furnish aids still do not meet up with necessary requirements. The aids are not feasible. A ten year-old computer is not equipped with those recently developed. I've had some professors tell me, 'well, you go to university and your work has to be handed in like everyone else. The same requisites apply to you too. You have to do your course like everybody,' but they

fail to forget that unlike everybody else, we don't have the same advanced computers. We lose our time because you they don't have the accents! It really does waste our time. They don't care about us because we're just a few people, we're what you call the minority. It's incredible if I had this computer when I was doing my masters it would be much more easier for me to do my work.! The time I would have saved on my assignments. Took think that I spoke to the minister about this problem, and to the university, and they did nothing about it! Nothing happened! I've read that the blind are limited when it comes time to being fully equipped for getting an education. We're encouraged to use a white cane, read, and write! However, when presented with what we need, we're pushed aside, like we don't even exist. We need to get better updated computers for the blind. I read many US studies, and many states have encountered the same problems. And they passed a legislation since 1990 about work and since that time, many studies are done in different universities. Many blind people have a good computer in the laboratory and are beginning to do studies about work. And that's really good to know.

-Valerie 42 years-

In this fast pace society, it may incredibly difficult to produce as much, or at most successfully without having the assistance of technological support. As we learned from Valerie, some visually impaired who attempt to pursue an education might very well have a difficult time in mastering the work compared to sighted students. Not only do they have the disadvantage of not being able to see, they are not furnished with the technological equipment they will need in order to achieve successfully in their education. Even though, the government has supplied, and can financially contribute and supply the visually impaired students with a computer, they must acknowledge that computers need to be constantly upgraded in order to keep up with our technological advanced society.

In Valerie's case, her computer is five years old. It's broken down time and time again. She's been told to deal with the 'minimum.' She insists that the problem lies in the product not being very well developed because the visual impaired population make up a small fraction of the society. For instance, take for instance, the computer does not provide translation in the French language. This has made it especially difficult for Valerie

to type her reports. Accents on specific words are very important. 'The aids are not feasible,' says Valerie. Even though the computer is not up-to-date they are denied access. The only problem is that professors still expect essays to be handed in on time with proper grammar and spelling structure.

Valerie's above sharing has certain implications. Visually impaired students may be denied the opportunity to achieve successfully compared to the sighted population. As a result this unequal access hinders them from doing as well as others in the class. Consequently, many may become unmotivated to continue in pursuance of their education, as they are not being properly trained for what is expected in the real world. Unfortunately, they are not equipped to face the challenges of the real work world.

'How much of it is your personality, and how much of it is your disability; there's a few jackasses out there that give everybody a bad name:' Is the 'sighted' world always to blame?

One sample member cared to discuss the affects of how a personality trait can also elicit certain behaviors from the public. Through her example, we come to understand that at times, it may not always be the general public who treats the blind wrongfully and unjustly. There are certain visually impaired persons who simply may be angry at the world and become abusive to others who may want to provide them with any form of assistance. Mary explains it more in detail in the following.

Like I mentioned to you before, I work for an organizations that deals with the visually impaired. But I'm wondering, and I'm thinking of one thing in particular, is it really their attitude, that is telling people off, or is it the fact that they are visually impaired. It's really hard to know. I have a friend who's totally blind and I don't see anyone being bad to him, but I'm sure it might happen, but I don't know if sometimes people are reacting to the disability, but I'm not quite sure. If you've gotten past the, 'Hi how are you' and how much of it is your personality, and how much of it is your disability, and

how much are you on edge, but how much are you defensive because of their disability, because their disability might get them somewhere. What comes first? Now I know people have had really bad experiences where people in the sighted world might say, I hate using that term, but I don't know how to say it, cuz that's the way it is. It's hard to know cuz I haven't ventured out too much on looking for a job in the sighted world where I've been turned down so maybe I would have had the damn godfull experiences, but I really just don't know. I believe some of the bad experiences people have had, and I know it's true and that's not them making it up in their head. But I'm just not sure whether that's the way it is in the real world everywhere. It's hard to come to terms with that though. I rather believe that it's the person's attitude and not the sighted world out there that sucks, but I know that's not the case, cuz I know society has come a long way... again you know also, and I think this is a big issue because I do not want think the worse of the sighted world, and as much as I hate going down in the middle, but there's this whole debate on people who are totally blind, and I have some friends who are, and again, it's like you are having so many problems and troubles in life in society in terms of a disability is it more because of your bloody attitude, because you're very defensive, or is it because you've been really wronged? Now I think it's both maybe. And I think that some visually impaired and blind people tend to forget that sighted people may become very uncomfortable even though this is something I grew up with, I'm surrounded by it all the time. I live with it on a daily basis, and I forgot that there are many people out there who don't have a freak'n clue, to me this is all very normal, so I know how to deal well, I know how to talk about it, I know what questions to ask, I know to tell somebody, here's this and here's that. I know what to look out for, and I know what to tell people and not to tell people. I know what to warn them of things that are in their way. I know that there are people who get very frustrated sometimes with people who don't. In one way I could understand that cuz sometimes I'll say, 'Gee Jesus Murphy, oh God it's so obvious that person was going o crash into it. Some people are just so stupid, well I shouldn't say that, or really dense. Or some people just really don't have a clue or some people are very ignorant about anything. It's amazing cuz because we live with it all the time they forget that we have people who don't live with it, and don't have a clue, like I can't imagine what it's like to be sighted. But because I have this difficulty, it's always going to make me more sensitive to stuff like this. And hopefully it will always make me be more sensitive to the issues of disability in general, do you know what I mean? Once you have a particular interest in it, or you know somebody who has it, then you're probably never going to cross it. And I think we forget that ya know. So immediate reaction is oh that person is so stupid. I've heard worse enough, believe me. They probably just don't know, and sometimes they just get angry, and sometimes it helps them to be angry, better be angry than be a victim...I've heard stories of which I believe, where people have approached someone who is blind, and pulled them across the other side of the street which sounds insane, like what kind of society to do we live in, like right, I also know that's true, because it's happened to a few people I know. You want to cut people some slack, but it's like whoah, don't go that far, and what makes yo think that they can't do it on their own. You automatically think that because they're blind. So how the blind also

cut people like that some slack. But again, I know of people who have been very rude to people who have offered them help, but then again it depends on the experiences that they have been through. And so I can understand why some people might have had bad experiences. But there's tons and tons of people who don't appreciate that help, let me tell you. There's a few jackasses out there that give everybody a bad name.

-Mary 37 years-

Could one's blindness affect one's attitude against how others perceive them?

Through Mary's above comments, we come to understand that struggling with one's own visual impairment may influence the way in which one chooses to accept and deal with one's loss of sight. One's own personal attitude towards oneself, may eventually affect the way we interact with another. As Mary shares, 'I don't know if sometimes people are reacting to the disability, but I'm not quite sure.' There may be times when visually impaired persons react defensively to others who offer their help because they are dealing with their loss of sight in a difficult manner.

Mary helps us understand that even though there will be some members of the general public who react negatively toward the visually impaired, she feels she's 'not sure whether that's the way it is in the real world everywhere.' She admits, 'I'd rather believe that it's the person's attitude and not the sighted world out there that sucks, but I know that's not the case, cuz I know society has come a long way.' However, in reality, there may also be visually impaired people who instantly navigate to decline the public's help. Mary states, 'how much are you defensive because of their disability... what comes first?'

Mary's comments discuss the interaction between blind and the general public.

Mary helps us understand that there will be cases when a sighted person may become uncomfortable during the presence of a blind person because they may not necessarily feel

'comfortable' since they have never been around them before and are worried about what to expect. What may seem to be very normal to the blind, may not necessarily be seen by the sighted in the same way. Some blind people may interpret the reactions of the sighted as negative and cruel. The intention of the sighted may have not been purposely cruel, but may be misunderstood as they may not know 'what questions to ask', or 'what to look out for.' As Mary suggests, often enough, some blind persons may become 'frustrated sometimes with people who don't know how to respond, or react to their requests.' Mary implies that we cannot generalize that the sighted generally maltreats all of the visually impaired. However, there may be many out there giving 'everybody a bad name.'

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has mainly concentrated on the impact society has on the blind. It has focused predominantly on the stigma of people who are blind, and how it can influence a person's life in the employment and public sectors of society. Employers were found to be generally discouraging to the respondents. Colleagues and employers were also found to be disrespecting towards the respondents. Their comments undermine the ability of the blind to function independently. In accordance to the workplace, respondents were discriminated against because of their physical difference. My respondents said that they felt hurt, aggravated, devalued, and humiliated. Respondents pointed out that the work environment may not always be adaptable to the physical needs of the visually impaired.

In terms of the general public, they've become sources for verbal assumptions undermining the ability of the blind's ability to function independently. There have been public situations where blind have been made to feel incompetent. Embarrassing moments

have also lead strangers to ridicule them. Some respondents report being discriminated against in public restaurants even though the law permits them to bring their guide dogs in with them. Often when they've told the waiters that the law permits it, they were responded rudely and still asked to leave the restaurant.

It also appears that one reason respondents may have endured no help from strangers is because at times the general public may have not been aware of their visual impairment. As a result, this may be disadvantageous to some blind persons who may really require the assistance of the public. There will be other times when strangers may decide for themselves when a visually impaired person requires help. They take the decision into their own hands without obtaining consent.

The general public was also a source for acts of physical violence. Some situations called concern for their life. There are strangers who may take advantage over the situation and use the blind person as bait for taunts of physical violence. The city's geographical setting may also become unfriendly for blind's mobility. Ramped curves, snow-banks, roadblocks, construction sites, can all become hazardous settings for the blind. The above details can disorient and make it all the more difficult for the blind person to get from one destination to the next.

Although the government has established policies and provided the visually impaired with technological equipment they may require, they have still yet to continue to improve the quality and quantity of services to the visually impaired population. It is not enough to provide them with technologically advanced equipment, but is as equally important to provide continual support and updated software for them. As such,

technology is a rapid force going through continuance change on a so often periodic basis. It is for this very reason that the government should consistently provide continual support of updated software to this population, as many are in the process of getting educated and are competing with other students who have easier access to such equipment. Lack of updated software may decrease the visually impaired person's ability to succeed in an educational and work setting. As a result, this may discourage them from continuing their education because they are not being properly trained for what the real work world has to offer. Unfortunately, lack of an education could possibly mean that they would have more of an oppressive time competing in a work world where others are familiar to technological advanced computers that help get the job done. Is it really fair that the visually impaired population be denied the opportunity to succeed?

This chapter has focused on the stigmatization and marginalization that the blind may face in various areas of life: employment, and in public areas. When taken separately, each example of prejudice could be survived, but the cumulative impact in every sector of their entire lives could become overwhelming and devastating. These experiences have become complex issues in their lives, and have become the tacks that are necessary to make headway for what needs to be done to overcome these events. These social sources have altered and modified their lives. Despite these adversities, the respondents have created ways to develop their coping. The next chapter thoroughly explores the coping strategies that were used in order to adjust to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of blindness, and to the discrimination they encountered in different areas of life.

CHAPTER 8

COPING STRATEGIES

This chapter focuses on the strategies the respondents have devised in adjusting to their blindness, and, in coping with the adversities that may often accompany a highly visible disability. These strategies varied depending on the circumstances of the interaction and the informant's coping skills.

It was found that family support was the first component that helped the respondents to accept the physical adjustment of blindness. Acceptance enabled the way for the respondents to train for physical and vocational rehabilitation. This was a portentous factor in the restoration of health. Rehabilitation and the learning of life skills was essential for the respondents to readapt to their new way of living. Then once all of the above was in place, setting goals and accomplishing them became of equal importance.

This chapter also discusses the primary methods that my respondents have taken in order to react and respond to discrimination. These typologies are not mutually exclusive and do overlap. They include (1) *The Isolates*- Those who disconnect and isolate themselves from the world outside and avoid certain situations in their daily life. They would rather cope in total isolation. (2) *The Rebels* - those who are quick to respond to the insults and discrimination, and are forthright in asserting their dignity as human beings. They may even be verbally and physically abusive. (3) *The Self-Entertainers*- those who resent maltreatment, but internalize and assimilate their pain to themselves and escape by engaging in certain activities. They indulge in different forms of self-entertainment to

adjust and deal with the alleviation of pain and sorrow. For instance, some pursue interests in dance, humour, music etc. (4) *The Talkers*- those who discuss their adversities and hardships with friends and family. (5) *The Experimenters* - those who test their limits and boundaries by exploring new heights in hopes of finding an alternative measure to happiness. (6) *The Positivists*- those who live life to the fullest because they believe they are capable of doing so. (7) *The Activists*- those who firmly believe in their rights, and affirm the possibilities of living a successful life having a visual impairment. They are involved in advocating public awareness about blindness in a positive manner. (8) *The Self-Acceptors*- those who willingly accept their blindness and have learned to adapt to their new role and identity.

These typologies are not mutually exclusive as respondents may often engage in more than one of these strategies, or have moved from one strategy to another. However, they do tend to specialize in one or two. Only one of the respondents engaged in all of the typologies. Each of the coping strategies are discussed in this chapter. I begin by introducing the three main factors that have contributed in setting the anchor for physical adjustment of blindness: family support, rehabilitation and the development of personal goals.

'They've become a lot more emotionally available': Family Ties become Towers of Strength.

A family bond can play a dominant role in anyone's immediate environment. Some of the respondents have shown that family support has become a major source in heightening their own facilitation towards acceptance and rehabilitation. Of the twelve

respondents, seven agreed that family support was extremely influential in their own acceptance of their blindness.

... I needed to hear my husband tell me that he'd always be there even when he couldn't understand what I was going through. And he was right. He couldn't always understand the frustrations of having certain limits when you're blind. But he helped me come to terms that I could either choose to live, or let myself go. He helped build my confidence and he played a major role in having me accept my blindness.

-Deborah 44 years-

...I wasn't always close to my parents. It was sort of hard for my parents to know exactly what to do in the beginning. They learned more about it, and helped me realize that I'd be okay. Somehow that really motivated me to accept the new responsibility of being blind.

-Doug 19 years-

My mother passed away when I was very young. My father was the best when it all happened. He was nervous, but I know deep down he had to understand that he had to be strong for me. And that he was. I mean he didn't know what to say at first, but he found a way to let me know that he'd always be there for me. He was strong, and I know that made me strong too. It became one of the factors that helped me realize that I didn't have to sulk and depress myself. He said I was being selfish if I didn't take the time to deal with it. It was like confronting my fears.

-Melissa 23 years-

... I mentioned to you before that my family's support meant everything. They never made me feel like a burden, and they helped me along the way. They made me realize that being blind at 60 doesn't have to mean that my life is over. It was one of the reasons why I pushed myself to be independent.

-Bailey 62 years-

... I spoke of this earlier, and I said that at first, I couldn't understand why my parents wanted to send me away. It didn't make sense to me. I thought they wanted to get rid of their blind child. This really hurt inside. Mom explained to me that I had to go to that special school so I could learn to take care of myself. I remember her telling me, 'do you want me to keep washing your hair?' I remember us both laughing. Even though I knew what she meant, it was still hard, but I began to understand things more clearly. If it weren't for them I don't think I'd start my rehabilitation so young. I'd like to think that I would have eventually, but they really helped me understand that I needed it really badly... my brothers and sisters made me realize that many things were also possible to do even when you're blind. They always got me involved in family activities. They

brought me with them on many outings and that helped me a lot. I went skiing and swimming with them. These experiences really helped me a lot when I went away to that special school.

-Valerie 42 years-

My family, what can I say about them. They've been driving me crazy and without them I wouldn't be where I am today. They helped me accept my new life. It wasn't always easy with them. Especially with my wife, she was always trying to do everything for me. I had to make her realize that I had to be independent, and that she couldn't always breathe down my neck. Having her accept my blindness really helped me deal with it a lot more. I guess you could say it gave me additional strength to get my life back together. They became a lot more emotionally available and that's what the doctor Mark prescribed himself.

-Mark 45 years-

It is quite obvious from the above that family support has played a major role in helping more than half of the respondents move toward accepting their disability and dealing with this new life expectancy and adjusting to a world which they could no longer see. The other five respondents, along with most of those mentioned above, reported how physical rehabilitation also made adjustment much easier.

Rehabilitation becomes a viable source in helping the visually impaired in succeeding full recognition for independence again. The following section explores what it has particularly done for the benefit of our respondents.

'Raising the umbrella against the storm': Adjustment to blindness means rehabilitation.

In general, we learned that persons who are legally blind may be judged as incompetent. Since competence is a major source of self-esteem, it has in the past made attainment for motivation more difficult. However, all members of the sample claim that learning the necessary rehabilitation skills was helpful in regaining full independence. For all respondents, rehabilitation became a significant factor that helped them adjust to

blindness. Without having gone through rehabilitation training, life skills would have not been learned.

The ultimate goal of the rehabilitation process consists of several specifically operative services that are important to physical and emotional adjustment. Some imperative services range from psycho-social assessment, orientation to the rehabilitation process, counseling, advocacy/resource provision, service coordination, education, orientation and mobility, technological services, occupational therapy, recreation, and other aid programs . These among other multi-disciplinary services help provide opportunities to foster in the area of education and employment. They become effective in providing the respondents with life-long skills. My respondents discussed the process of 'rehabilitation' as follows:

It wasn't a question. When it happened I had to change my lifestyle and that meant signing myself up at the MAB. Like I told you before, my overall concern had to do with my independence. I need to learn how to read braille in order to continue to write my book reviews. Knowing how to operate with talking books also made thing a lot easier. It's not the same as reading, and not as good, but's it's also helped me continue to write my book reviews. At least it's given me the option. ... I needed to become independent again because having to ask for help really conflicted with my personality. ... I had to move quickly in my environment. I love to cook, so re-organizing my kitchen was a must. The training helped me cook again, it really did. My trainer came over and helped me by placing tactile velcro all around the stove so I would know how to identify items on it. He also helped me with my guide dog, who's my absolute best friend. With Ripley, I can automatically detect that we've come to the end of a street because he just sits there. He helps me avoid obstacles and helps me that way. We're a great team. ... My rehabilitation has also helped me learn how to refine my senses. I use my ears and hands for everything. They help me take decisions. I use it to detect sense of traffic. The only times I have difficulty is when there is heavy construction, music, or the wind is really strong and it affects my ability to detect the sounds I need to look out for. My nose is the best. It keeps me posted on whether the food is being burnt or not. My sense of smell helps me very much. I am able to detect if the food is done, cuz you know, there's always a particular smell when the a dish is ready. I also use sound to get information and find my way. I remember asking the bus driver to drop me off on Winston street. He forgot, and I

knew because I didn't smell the Dunkin Donuts. ... I honestly believe that if I had not taken rehabilitation courses I would have gone this far with my life. It has saved me, it really has. ... Learning to become independent again really helped me accept the fact that I was never going to see again.

-Helen 35 years-

I had in my mind that blindness would not stop me from continuing my life. I have always said that humans are made to adapt to any situation. It was important for me that I continue to be independent, and I knew that the only way to do this was to get the training that I needed. There was no hesitation about it. I needed it and I was going to get it. The whole process motivated me. I mean there were some days when all I had just about enough. But I knew that some days were going to be worse than others, but I was willing to face that. It helped me adjust to my blindness a lot. I'm sure others will tell you the same.

-Nelson 31 years-

I can't say I prefer one of my senses over the other I use them all. I especially need my hearing for traveling and communication. I need my sense of touch for my dancing. When I dance I need to feel my surroundings so that I could know where I need to be. I need to feel my partner to know where he will lead me. All of the senses really help me. They're not indispensable. I need them to keep going in life. At first I didn't realize how much I needed them. It was not until I took rehabilitation courses. My trainer really made the whole process somewhat easier and more comfortable. Taking mobility training, and learning to use my other senses has helped me live the independent life I for so long wanted to have. My trainer helped me realize that they were always there, they just needed to get sharpened.... Part of the rehabilitation also meant that you had the chance to talk to a counselor if you really needed to. At first I thought I wasn't going to see no shrink. I was always told that they just make your life a whole lot worse and don't even know what the hell they're talking about. Well, you know what, talking to this person has really changed my life. Sometimes we don't realize we need things until we actually go through it. Going through counseling really helped me a lot, especially once I was ready to face the reality that I was never going to see again. ... rehabilitation has helped me deal with my blindness and adjust to it.

-Gloria 39 years-

I began very young to accept the fact that I would not see some day. When it got worse, I was hoping for it to go faster as I could not stand being in the middle of nowhere. I was not able to function as a sighted person, yet I could not be helped as a blind one. In those days, I only knew the Canadian National Institute for the Blind who had no mandate to help you unless you were legally blind. Of course, I dealt with it quite well back them. Rehabilitation really saved me! I mean it. It taught me that everything in my life had to be adapted. There is no such thing as changing a few things to accommodate. Your whole life has to be built around a handicap if you really want to live around it. Unfortunately,

you have to be strong to be handicapped. It's an everyday challenge. With a bit of determination, it gets easier with time. Once in a while you get depressed but life must go on. The world won't stop just because you're moaning and groaning at what's happened to your life. I realized this only when I went through rehabilitation. They not only provided me with the skills I needed in order to be independent. They also helped me deal with the adjustment psychologically. I mean, I really don't know where I'd be right now if I didn't get their help. It's funny, I married a rehabilitation teacher and became part of a life of helping others. The rest is history. I still help others but now I do it professionally.

-Kevin 41 years-

Wow, I remember not wanting any help. I was so mad at the world. I really did only see darkness. I was completely lost, angry, and felt cheated. But I eventually did realize that I needed help in order to get my life back on track. So I signed up to take rehabilitation course. And in the beginning I was just ready to quit. I thought, I should just hire my own personal nurse and have her put me in diapers. I was really discouraged. But like everything else, you need to put hard work into it. ... Going to a rehabilitation center really helped get my life together. They helped me learn how to use my senses. Touching became so important. My hearing became very important too. Sounds do everything for me. Before becoming blind I used to be afraid to touch. You know there's always been a censure that you shouldn't touch, and that's the way most of us have been brought up. They helped me break the ice, because I was very shy with my hands. I know it sound weird but, my mom used to always tell me, be careful what you touch. I have to touch things around me now. I use touch everyday, especially with my dance. My partners and I know that if we touch, it's because we have to know where we are, especially me. And that's a whole different world. It's got a new meaning, a new meaning of touching. I know this may sound pretty basic to you, but the MAB really did that for me. I got the training that I needed to live the way I once used to. They really helped. I mean if I didn't learn how read braille, or travel with a white cane, among other things, I wouldn't be where I am today in my life. They really helped me change my life, and I am really indebted to them.

-Deborah 44 years-

Like I told you before, it was all so very depressing when I first lost my sight. I spend most of my time crying, even though I knew as time would past, I had no choice but to move on. What really helped the most was talking to others who were also going though the same experience. I saw how well they were doing, and told myself, 'if they could do it, why can't I?' And so of course, I started rehabilitation at the MAB. Like I told you before, I needed that so I could go back to regular high-school. I learned braille so I could read. I also learned how to operate a talking computer. I learned some very important independent skills too, like learning how to take the bus, and travel alone. They have mobility instructors they're called o and m instructors orientation and mobility. And those are the people that train you how to travel, and there's also the adial people who train you how to cook, or wash dishes or whatever, or to do housework. It's

called the adial, which basically stands for: assistant daily living skills.' I was in the rehabilitation center for two long years, and was ready to get back to regular high-school. ... They did a lot for me. I mean I wouldn't have been able to pursue my education without having learnt braille. I mean they really helped gain my independence.

And for that I will always be grateful. I mean they tested my ability to see whether I would be able to manage on my own in the real world. Like I told you before, sometimes I felt like they didn't want me to move forward. I was ready to survive regular high-school, and some people in there didn't think so. I mean it's not that I didn't love the people, and that why I wanted to get out of there. But I had reached a point in my life where I knew I needed to move on, and they helped me find my way. ... Going through rehabilitation made blindness much easier to deal with at that age, I think at any age it does that!

-Patrick 18 years-

When I was a child growing up I was brought to the MAB for schooling in order to begin my training. I really didn't have much a choice on that part. My parents made me go there. And as much as I didn't want to, I still went, and I'm grateful for that today. They really train you for everything there. I learnt how to read braille, travel with a white cane, and so much more. Like, they trained me how to rely on my senses to get things done. And that's something I've always relied on much more. My hearing is probably the most useful. Unfortunately, it's not as good as it used to be. Maybe it's cuz I blasted the music really, really loud back in my teen years. My sense of touch is actually very good. I haven't really thought about it that much, but it's funny cuz when I go shopping, well maybe I don't know if everyone is like me, but I'll look at something and if it looks nice to me, I have to touch it. I have to feel what the material is like, and that makes a big difference. If people tell me it looks very good, but if it feels awful, forget about it! So that's a big thing for me. It makes a big difference. It makes a big difference for sure. I guess, let me try and think, I don't really know how I've relied on my sense of touch more. Umh, but I think, I guess there is that need ya know for you to see something that catches your eye. Whether it's an article of clothing, whatever it is ya know, because of the color. And I guess the touching of it, uh, it defines it a lot more. But I sill rely on my 8 percent of vision in that one eye. I do try to use it completely. And the MAB has helped me with that. Actually, I recently went back this year to taking computer courses. I'm thinking of going back to school and I know it would be very useful for me. They've made dealing with blindness a lot easier.

-Mary 37 years-

When I lost all of my vision and went totally blind I was not prepared to deal with it. I had to ask the MAB to help me, I really became desperate. I needed help so that I could function better. Today, with the help of my mobility orientation, braille and computer lessons, I keep myself pretty busy and manage to keep in touch with the rest of the world.

Without my training, I would have never made this far. It's helped me adjust to my blindness. If I didn't go through the process of training I would have never been able to work among other things. It's made me a much stronger person!

-Mark 45 years-

I was very young when I lost my sight, and my parents sent me to that rehabilitation school. It was only until 1985 when they began to integrate children in regular school. It wasn't the same when I was growing up. Like I explained now in my story it was in 1968/69, where every child went to this school. It was a specialized school for girls, and they had a separate one for boys. Then they decided to integrate boys and girls in the same school. This school accepted multi-handicapped children. Basically, if children had hearing, sight, or another handicap they would integrate everybody else in this one school. In the school I learned to read braille, and other important life skills. They taught me how to use my senses and appreciate them, cuz I was gonna have to use them a lot more now. Touching and hearing became very important. I learned to use my sense of touch to read braille. My sense of touch is really good. I've used it to identify many things in the fridge, and put paper in the printer. By feeling a flower, and smelling it, I could tell what kind it is. ... Going to this rehabilitation school really helped me deal with my blindness. Without having learnt how to do this all, I wouldn't be able to be where I am today. I guess you could say it helped me accept my blindness because it made me understand that I could deal with it, and that it didn't have to control my life, you know what I mean?

-Valerie 42 years-

Well coping, huh. I think over time, I gradually got used to the idea that this is how I'm going to have to live, so I might as well go ahead and get on with life. I told myself that getting my life back on track meant learning how to do the things I was used to doing. The rehabilitation process wasn't so easy. I really had to start from scratch. But I was motivated to do it, cuz I wanted to get on with it. Learning how to read, travel among other things really did make things a lot better in my life. The MAB really helped me deal with my vision loss. I honestly think I would have not been able to be where I am today if I didn't learn how to take care of myself. I didn't hesitate about learning. I know it's helped me accept my vision loss a lot better.

-Doug-19 years-

I have to be honest with you, it's about time I say this, and I take it, and I'm being very serious here when I first walked into this association I was just a normal blind person, but these people have made me who I am. And with their programs and rehabilitation services, they are the best at helping people with their disabilities. They have patience, a heart, and are so wonderful. It's a community, who is always there to help people deal with their blindness. I haven't met one bad person here. They really are the most amazing and wonderful people. I mean when it all happened, I really thought that my life was over. You can't imagine what I went through. The reassurance around me at the MAB helped me adjust to my blindness. And how did I cope, well, very slow at first. I had to rely on a lot of people to do things for me, and then I decided I had to become independent and independence is a very big thing for me. You just got to get off your butt

and do things.... Learning braille was the best thing I've ever learned. It's helped me to identify things. I can make braille labels to attach things. I can read again! By being able to read braille I can read labels and read what is on them. This means I don't have to rely on my wife or children to find my Tom Jones CD. Isn't that funny. I can now file away all my compact discs in order. This makes things a lot easier for me cuz I can get whatever compact disc I want and know what section it will be in because it will have been identified with a label made out of braille. Learning braille has just made things a lot easier for me. I've made braille labels for my coat hanger so I know what shirt I'm taking off the hook. I know where everything is in my house. And I mean anything. For instance, with braille labels I know how to identify the 2 litres of milk and the 2 litres of juice carton. Same with my salt and pepper shakers. And my stove is all marked with braille prints, so I'm able to make me some porridge in the morning, or I can just have cold cereal, or scrambled eggs and toast. I could basically do it all. And I wouldn't be able to do it all if I didn't get the proper rehabilitation. It really has helped me adjust to it all.

-Bailey 62 years-

You don't know what it's like until you actually go through it. And when it all happened, I was young and of course, didn't know about much that was going on. I didn't have much of a choice. My dad wanted me to undergo rehabilitation training. So I really didn't have much say in whether I really wanted to go or not. And at first I thought it was going to be a waste of my time, but it actually helped a whole lot! I mean it really did help adjust to my blindness, and make it easier for me to accept that I wasn't going to get my sight back. ... The rehabilitation center helped me sharpen the use of my senses. Two are very important to me, and actually three that I could live without. I'll put them in order. Of course, the first would be hearing. I love to listen to music, I'm actually crazy about it. I just love sounds. Since I am blind, I do have to use it to it's full capacity. I love the feeling of touching. And I do use my sense of touch everyday, it's a real must. Frankly, if I had to lose my sight, or hearing, I'd lose my sight. I can't live without hearing music, birds, ocean. Definitely.

-Melissa 23 years-

The following section elaborates on the strategies respondents have devised in coping with the daily adversities that often accompany the adjustment of blindness.

Strategies were used depending on the circumstances that respondents's were in. In some cases, some respondents often engaged in more than one of the strategies. As mentioned above, these typologies are not mutually exclusive. Each of the coping strategies is

discussed below.

The Isolates: 'I was in total isolation'

For half of the respondents, isolation seems to have been the first response to blindness. Sometimes, for many of the respondents, hiding away into self-isolation became the only measure of surviving. Isolation became a way to deal with their blindness. And for others, self-isolation helped them escape from the public's verbal taunts.

At first, I was quite a shy person, so it did not help not being able to see very much, trying to make new friends in this English school was very difficult once I left the MAB. And trying to fit in was even harder. That was a difficult part of my life. And the fact that was in total isolation in the MAB did not help improve my social skills so there were a lot of things that I lacked that other regular kids had already experienced in a regular school. And you know, when you go into the real world, it doesn't help if you don't have very good social skills. You know you don't always fit in, or you don't know how to approach things. Or even when you're with your friends, you wonder how you're going to basically interact with them. So at first, I pretty much was depressed, and just wanted to lock myself in my room and never come out again. I really felt sorry for myself, and I know others felt sorry for me too. I think most of us pretty much go through this stage. And I should think it's absolutely normal. I mean I was sick of people asking me to share my life story. Sometimes you just want to be left alone. ...At first, I avoided going to weddings, restaurants, parties. I really didn't go to a lot of parties. I just wanted avoid the public in general, they would become too much to handle. What really pissed me off was that the social workers were making my decisions for me. It's like my life was in their hands. They didn't even care how I felt about the whole thing. Like my opinion didn't even matter.

-Patrick 18 years-

Patrick was not only rebellious on certain occasions, but admits to isolating himself from others to avoid people's questions about his life story. On the other-hand, Valerie recalls feeling deprived from engaging in regular activities when she was away at the rehabilitation school. Isolation helped her deal with the pain because she knew no other way of dealing with the situation. She explains it in the following.

I remember a few seconds of this moment. What I do remember was asking my mother

during a walk and she said you will no longer have your sight. I don't remember much after that. But I do remember going up my room and crying my eyes out. I stayed in that room often besides having breakfast, lunch and supper. It was my next bestfriend until they got me to go to the Louis Braille school. I told you this before, but I felt isolated at this special school because I felt it deprived me from being a regular child. But I also felt isolated at home sometimes because I felt I didn't quite belong there. It was just easier sometimes to be alone. Even as a child, I understood the consequences of being alone. It was painful, but it's all I knew. I didn't know of any other way to react to the pain and aggravation.

-Valerie 42 years-

We can see from Patrick and Valerie's responses that turning to self-isolation became the result from not feeling connected, or not belonging to the rehabilitation school. Both participants agreed that feelings of not belonging to a certain environment contributed to loneliness. Patrick insisted that being held back from attending a regular school environment caused him to lack the social skills he needed when he re-entered regular highschool. Similarly, Valerie felt disconnected from her classmates because she felt she did not belong. The feeling of not belonging caused her to isolate herself from others, but it was a painful avoidance of "pain" and "aggravation." From Patrick and Mary's case we learn that sometimes blind persons tend to isolate themselves from the public when they don't feel like they belong.

We also learn from Patrick that sometimes isolation can become a tool for running away from the general. Being frequently asked to share personal life stories may prevent them from engaging in several formal events in order to escape the sympathy road trip.

Others like Mary wanted to isolate themselves to escape the verbal taunts they experienced at school. In some cases, avoiding certain places was the result from not wanting to ask for help. Mary feels that asking for help would call for others to ridicule

her. Unfortunately, this caused her to isolate herself from the public. She explains it as follows:

Like I told you before, I remember staying home a lot during high-school. I'd fake being sick, or I'd find any excuse in the book to avoid going to school. I didn't really enjoy being alone, but I didn't think anyone wanted to be around me. It hurt too much the way the other kids treated me. It was difficult enough to deal with blindness, and I didn't want to have to deal with any other bullshit. Sometimes being alone was the only thing I really knew how to do cuz I didn't have to question myself for it. Sometimes I'll have to ask for help on the street, and I'll do more than what I used to, but when I have to do it, I'll panic inside, it's like my pride. I've got a tremendous amount of pride and it's really hard for me to show somebody I need help. If you were to ask me why I'd tell you that I'm afraid that people will laugh at me. It's already worse enough that they'll say, oh look she has a visual impairment, so what, it'll be worse for people to think that I'm a freak. And to a certain extent, I'm probably not giving people enough credit, and I've been told that. And maybe it has to do with the past. Because for me I haven't had a lot of bad experiences, I've had a few, but not a lot. And that's why in the past I've avoided going to certain places where I may actually need to ask for help. I thought it would just best if I stay at home.

-Mary 36 years-

For others like Gloria, Deborah, and Mark, isolation became the added therapeutic touch to their lives. It was a venue they had to engage in and at some point or another to conceal and recover from the daily adversities they encountered. This was the choice they had made for themselves. They each share their experiences below.

It was horrible in the beginning. My parent's overprotectiveness drove me crazy. They didn't want me going out on my own, and I forbid to have a tag along person with me all the time. So I spent a lot of time at home trying to feel sorry for myself. I hated it because I had my mother always breathing down my throat. But I did spend a lot of time alone. At times I was really lonely, but I think that it really did help. It made me realize that I didn't want to feel helpless for the rest of my life. So in some crazy way, it motivated me to deal with what I had to do to get up on my own two feet again. You think a lot when you're alone. It may not always feel so good, but it can help.

-Gloria 39 years-

I mean it's normal to want to be by yourself sometimes. And yes, I did that frequently in the beginning, and sometimes I do just want to be left alone for my peace of mind. I think it's really therapeutic, you know it really can be. Sometimes you want to be away from it all.

At first, I wanted to be by myself because I didn't want to deal with the everyone else's sympathy and shit. I had a hard time with the whole thing, and I needed to be alone. And sometimes, I still do want to be alone and get away from it all. I know sometimes people mean well, but I get quite sick of them treating me like a child. Just because I'm blind doesn't mean I'm totally dysfunctional. And that's why I avoid certain places because I know that's the kind of treatment I'll get.

-Deborah 44 years-

It's difficult to interact with people sometimes on a one to one level, because they could sometimes forget that they are talking to a blind man. I've had my share of weird experiences. And that's why I just avoid certain places. I don't enjoy parties like I used to. Some people forget to introduce themselves to me like I'm suppose to know who I'm speaking to. Others will shout and think that not only are you blind, but also deaf. I'd rather just avoid gatherings filled with a lot of people I don't know. It's not as bad as it used to be. In the beginning, all I wanted to do was stay at home. I soon realized the fun I was missing and I know that being alone is what made me realize this. My wife and kids had to drag me out of the house. I didn't feel like I could be out there, you know, enjoying life like everybody else. Things changed, but I still avoid certain places, like pubs, large social events, parties where I don't know people. You know, places like that.

-Mark 45 years-

From all of the six respondents above, we learn that retreating into isolation has been a common (and useful) strategy at least for a while in the beginning. It enabled some of the respondents to come to terms with their new reality, and, then to see the limitations of this strategy as a long term goal. For instance, in Gloria's case, isolation made her realize that she did not want to become 'helpless' all her life. In Deborah's case, it got her to be 'away from it all.' It gave her an opportunity to reflect on what she didn't want to obtain from people, and that of course was 'sympathy.' Similar to Deborah and Gloria, Mark avoided certain social events to escape the questions and the formalities of introducing himself to others. In the end to his liking, he realized through total isolation that he did in fact miss the fun of socializing like everyone else.

In Melissa's case, sometimes isolation became the only answer when other

classmates were not accepting of her, and this is what initially persuaded her to loneliness.

Unlike Gloria, Deborah, and Mark, self-isolation was not seen as a therapeutic tool.

Isolation only caused more sorrow for feeling like the odd one from the bunch. However, in the end isolation made her stronger to believe in herself. Melissa realized she did not want to remain feeling sorry for herself.

In high-school the kids weren't really accepting of me. So I wasn't one who attended school dances, or parties. I was somewhat of a loner. I had friends, but I didn't always hang out with them. They were great, but sometimes I felt like the odd one most of the time. Yeah it really was painful to be all by myself when I knew that all the other girls were at the school dance, or at pajama party. But it really became the only way for me to handle all of it. I was young, and didn't think much of other things. I guess like every teenager, they go through a period of depression, and want to stay away from everyone they possibly know. The only difference is that I did this for most of my high-school days. Later on, I realized I paid the price and that helped me realize that I couldn't sit on my ass all day and feel sorry for myself. It made me stronger.

-Melissa 23 years-

The Rebels

In certain situations, two of the respondents said that they were quick to verbally and physically respond to verbal taunts and insults. They did not tolerate maltreatment.

Instead, one of the respondents was ready to verbally attack, and in another case, the other was willing to take matters into their own hands by being physically abusive.

Behaving in this manner gave them a sense of relief that they could be just as cruel. It also served as a weapon for defense. Both Melissa and Patrick explain it in the following:

High-school was extremely difficult. Teenagers could really be cruel. And sometimes it felt good to be cruel to others and give them a piece of the cake. I've even been cruel with other kids with disabilities. It's like two eyes in the same socket. I'd shred them off and call them names, especially when they were alone. I just had to make sure they were in the room. I was a feisty little bitch I have to admit. I know it wasn't always the right thing to do, but it's like they deserved it for me go through hell. I needed to stand up to

myself, nobody else did for me. I wanted them to feel they way they made me feel. I wanted to put them in their place, and many times I did. I had to given them a taste of their own medicine.

-Melissa 23 years-

In Melissa's case, the verbal insults revoked as verbal assertion. Calling others' names gave her the strength to stand up for herself and voice how she felt about their derogatory comments. It helped assert her ground and let them know that she too could insult them. In Patrick's case, verbal insults was replaced with the opportunity to physically hurt someone.

I haven't really had that many negative experiences. But there was this one guy who was really asking for it. You know the guy that was I was telling you about that gave me a hard time at the bus stop. You know how I told you that he was screaming out loud saying that I went in front of the line and was getting in his way. I wanted to get back at him so I tripped him as he walked up to the bus steps. I'm not really proud of that, but it just felt good at the time. And I'm really glad that I did it then. It felt good to hear others laugh at him. When I heard him fall, I was thrilled. It's a good thing he didn't get hurt. The people around us saw it as an accident, but I knew exactly what I was doing. I know I shouldn't of done that, but sometimes, getting even really helps. I can't believe I'm saying this. You don't have to worry, I'm not like that anymore.

-Patrick 18 years-

In Patrick's case, tripping the young male was a way of alleviating his pain, and at the same time seeking revenge to ridicule someone who tried to mock him in public. For some other respondents the pain of oppression may have been unbearable influencing them to isolate themselves from the outside world and those around them.

Self-Entertainers: 'That helped me escape'

Some of the respondents developed new activities that helped them cope with daily adversities. In some cases, these engagements served as extra curricular activities that made life a little bit easier. The respondents share their feelings below.

Did I ever look forward to going home at the end of the day! Week-ends were the best. They seemed so far away, and yet when Friday came along, it went by so fast. In high school, particularly, in grade 7, I started getting into music much more. That helped me escape, and I loved watching t.v. Not that I could see much, but I still had 8 percent of vision that allowed me to see. I also got into those teeny bopper magazines. It was fun, and was a real scape goat for me. But definitely my music. I listened to Olivia Newton John, and I had every one of her records CD's and tapes, and books. Love her to death. I really adore her. As a kid I've always been a music fan, so I remember for my 6th Christmas I got a transistor radio. And my family was always into music too. We always had music playing. So I grew up with an appreciation for their music and mine. But in the 70's I really loved Barry Manilow. Just anything that soothers the soul, does it ever! I just love music It really helped me get through all the lonely times.. ... I really relied on my imagination and daydreams all the time to just help me get through it, just to help me through my loneliness and isolation.

-Mary 36 years-

I love playing the piano. I always have. And once I lost my sight, I found myself playing more often. There were days that all I did. Just sat and played the piano. Playing the piano made me realize that I hadn't lost my ability to do everything. I guess you could say it gave me hope that I wouldn't lose my touch with everything else. ... Playing the piano has been really therapeutic for me. It still is. It gives me peace of mind.

-Bailey 62 years-

For both Mary and Bailey, music plays an important role in their adjustment to daily adversities. In so many ways, it helped alleviate the pain and emotional turmoil they have undergone in the past. As Mary describes, "it helped me get through the lonely times." Bailey also describes his appreciation for the piano. He admits it played an important role in helping him realize that he had not lost his ability to do everything he once loved to do. Unlike Bailey, Mary reflected on her imagination and daydreaming to help her escape the isolation. We learn from both respondents that music and engaging in one's imagination becomes a way of dealing with isolation and, in some cases, reassures a person's confidence level in their ability to maintain their daily rituals.

Similarly, Deborah engaged in a world of dance that helped her face her fear to

take risks. It also set the foundation for her to be more aware of herself as a person. She explains how dance has consoled her, and how it has helped her adjust to blindness.

My body moves and I know which part to use to feel more safe, and more secure and more solid. Dancing has done that all for me and more. Before losing my sight, I wasn't a person who took a lot of risks. And now I'm not afraid to take risks. I tell myself I'm going to try it. And even if it doesn't work, and even if I fall, I've learned to fall, and not hurt myself. My body has learnt to react. Dancing has taught me to be more aware of myself and my whole body. I've become much less concerned about hurting myself. It really changed my life, and it's a whole new world. It's helped me escape from my own worries and concerns. It takes away the stress of having to deal with people's ignorance, and deal with daily difficulties of being visually impaired. It's fun, it's a pleasure. It's a game in a way, which makes it nice. It's a game but at the same time, it's a learning process that took so many years, and we still learn new things every time we meet. ... dancing has helped me express myself a lot more. So when I express myself with dance, it's an exercise, and all my frustrations that occur in my daily life are gone. I could also express my feelings through dance and within dance that really helps. Sometimes blind people might find that they're always on the edge, you know like 'where do I go now?'

With dance, you're just free to let yourself go. You're having fun, you're really comfortable and at ease to express yourself. ... Dancing has made me feel like less than the odd one. I'm not as afraid of going up to people and socializing. ... It's helped me go through a lot of emotions. I've learned through dance that there are no limits. I've learned that you should never put any limits on something unless you've tried it... I used to be afraid of learning how to use my space. Space was something I was afraid of taking because of the fact that I can't see so I don't know the distance that I can allow myself to take. Dance has helped me learn how to use the space around me and not be afraid of touching and taking the risk of getting somewhere. It's really saved my life. Not only does dance entertain me, but it helps me refine my space in the world.

-Deborah 44 years-

Not only has dance made Deborah aware of her body, it has also helped her deal with her emotions. It has helped her understand that there are no limits on something unless you have tried it. She admits that it does serve as some form of entertainment, but also 'refines' her space in the world. It has helped her deal with the frustrations of dealing with people's ignorance. Deborah defines it not only as it being 'fun,' but that it has made her feel like less of the 'odd' one because she can do what any other sighted person can.

From Deborah's sharing, we learn that engaging in regular activities might boost up a blind person's level of confidence.

Others like Patrick and Helen use their humor to cope with daily challenges. They explain below.

Humor is also one of the ways I cope with the challenges I face everyday. I joke around with people and stuff. It really helps me when I'm feeling down. I need to laugh at least once a day. Humor has been very therapeutic in my life. It's one of the ways I try and cope with my blindness.

-Patrick 18 years-

I love having a great sense of humor. It's really great just for my sanity. Laughing with other people really relaxes me, it just makes me feel more comfortable with myself, and it really has saved me from self-pity.... I love holding on to the memories too. Like I mentioned earlier to you, there will always be some sentimental aspects attached to my vision loss. I mean, I will never see my nephews grow up, but I will always remember what they looked like when they were really young boys. I'll also remember my brothers without wrinkles! I mean I know the what the color blue still looks like. And sometimes when I need to remember, I just try and remember what the sky is like, and I can remember. Now that's a good feeling. I know what things look like, and will always know. I can imagine them in my mind because I used to be able to see them once upon a time. So that obviously has helped me a lot especially when I'm feeling down.

-Helen-35 years-

In addition to humor, Helen has relied on her memory to help her remember what some of her family members look like. Helen says she is at an advantage for having had the chance to once see. This allows her to remember what things look like in the world. We learn from Helen that sometimes those who have lost their sight after birth may see themselves at an advantage for having the opportunity to recall what certain things look like. Like Helen, Melissa describes similar feelings for having had the opportunity to once see.

I've been told I have a phenomenal memory. It's true I do! I can remember what things look like. I guess you could say that I'm at an advantage from those who lost their sight

at birth or early on in life who don't remember what things look like. And that really helps me sometimes. It's not hard for me to picture a blue sky, or a rainy day because I've seen those things before. So it's great cuz when I ask my friend what the weather's like, I could picture in my mind what she's describing to me. And I don't feel that left out from the rest of the world.

-Melissa 23 years-

Others like Mark may become members of different sport organizations. For instance, Mark recently joined a lawn bowling association for the blind and admits to having met a lot of nice people in the summer. His participation even got him into the national championships.

In the next section, respondents share their comfort in discussing their experiences with others who are visually impaired and with people in general.

The Talkers: 'Telling People'

Talking to others who were also visually impaired became a safe haven for nine of the respondents. Sometimes it became especially therapeutic to dismiss their pain, anger, and sadness with other visually impaired persons who also shared similar experiences. Respondents expressed importance in discussing with others who shared akin experiences. Most of the talkers described comfort in the experience of sharing since they knew that the experiences of others would make them understand where they were coming from. At the same time, they could easily receive 'feedback,' or 'advice' from someone who may have already coped with a similar situation. Some talkers described feeling 'safe' for sharing feelings with others who were in similar situations. Talking not only relieved the 'stress' and 'pain,' but made many realize that they were not going through this process 'alone.' Through these talks, they shared similar ways of dealing with things that came their way.

The nine respondents discuss the specifics in the following.

Since I've become blind, I have met a lot of wonderful people at the MAB who are in the same boat as I am. We can really talk amongst ourselves about some of the problem that we go through and we can honestly say that we understand one another. It really helps talking to other who can really understand what you're taking about. They listen and aren't there to give you advice if you don't want any, they just listen, and sometimes that all you really want for them to do. I also have recently joined a lawn bowling association for the blind and met a lot of nice people there last summer, I went to Edmonton for the national championships.

-Mark 45 years-

Speaking to my friends really helped me deal with it all. I first turned myself in the direction of my visually impaired friends. It was easier to talk to them because I knew they understood exactly what I going through. Don't get me wrong, my sighted friends were incredibly nice and were always sympathetic, but I knew they couldn't relate and thought sometimes bothered me cuz I thought are they really listening to me, or pretending to be? ... Talking to others who were in my boat really helped. I find that when I spoke to others who were going through the same ordeal, I would get feedback, and get to hear how they also shared the same experiences. I didn't get the 'umh huhs' like I would with my other sighted friends, but would get other sharing the same pain, and shedding a tear with me, not because they felt sorry for me, but because they felt the same pain.

-Valerie 42 years-

Both Valerie and Mark emphasize the importance of knowing that someone understands the experience you are going through. They highlight the significance that understanding comes only as a result of shared personal experiences. As Valerie mentioned in the above, "it was easier to talk to them because I knew they understood exactly what I was going through." Mark agrees with Valerie and says, "It really helps talking to other who can really understand what you're taking about." Unlike Mark, we learn from Valerie that sometimes it may be easier to share the pain and tears with someone who's gone through the experience because they won't feel sorry for you the way your 'sighted' friends can.

Others like Doug, Deborah, and Kevin, emphasize the amount of stress that was relieved by discussing their hardships with others who have gone through similar ordeals.

It all happened so quickly, and when it did, I wanted to be with others who were going through what I was going through. Talking to other blind children like me helped a lot as well. It helped me relieve a lot of the stress I was going through, a lot of the stress. I was able to identify with them more than other group of people . And I also started developing firm friendships with those.

-Doug 19 years-

It was important for me to get together with others who were blind. Talking to them relieved a lot of the stress I was going through. I felt more safe and secure to share my feelings with others who were also like me. I knew that I wasn't going to get, 'what on earth is she talking about?' At one point I found myself wanting to disclose more with them than my own husband. Talking to them made me realize that I wasn't the only one going through this life change. Everything came out when we got together, and it still does today. You don't think twice about what you say, because you feel comfortable with them. It really has helped me. These talks developed into friendships.

-Deborah 44 years-

I've met wonderful people who've made my life a lot easier. Not only do we share a common disability, but we also share similar ways of dealing with things as they come our way. These group of people have been very supportive of me, and have helped me during days when I just wanted to give up and leave the world. But talking to them has really helped me relieve the stress I was always faced with. I know that I'm not alone, and that there will be always be someone I can turn to if I ever should need to. I've even made close friends with most of them. Pretty corny coming from a man, but it's the truth.

-Kevin 41 years-

Not only did discussing to others alleviate stress for the all three respondents, it also served to establish life-long friendships with whom they could share in each others' support for one another.

For others like Melissa, it became important to talk to others with a visual impairment not only because they understood what she was going through, but because they never turned away from her when she needed them the most. Melissa understands that it may have been difficult for her sighted friends to deal with her feelings when they

did not in fact understand what she was going through. We learn that it becomes easier to release tension with others who can empathize with us when they have gone through it themselves because they've "lived it." Melissa explains it best in the following.

There are certain people you can't avoid in your life, and there are those you want to be around with when you feel the need to get things out. I've always been a talker, and talking helps me release the stress, most definitely. I've had, and still do have friends who are not visually impaired. And I've found that when I often turn to them for support they've looked the other way. I don't mean that in a bad way. I mean sometimes I know some may not know what to say because they can't relate to what I'm going through. And that's why I often turn to those who do understand what I go through. It's like, for me it's just easier to tell my other blind friends why I may hate the world on some days and not others. They understand, because they've lived it. And it really feels good when you let it all out and know that someone is not judging you. Cuz I really do hate hearing, 'you just feel that way cuz you're blind.' People can tend to forget that it's not the fact that I'm blind, but it more or less has to do with their someone's bloody attitude.

-Melissa 23 years-

For Patrick, Bailey and Helen, disclosing to other visually impaired helped them cope and adjust to blindness on a regular basis. From sharing experiences, to sharing advice, their insights assisted as comforting coping tools to adjust to the adversities linked to their blindness. As Patrick points out, "you can't see their facial expression, but you know they're listening," and that really helped. For Helen, these people became more than family. In some cases, talking to them made her realize that there are many possibilities for bringing your life back on track. These people served as motivators for believing that if they could do it, so could our respondents. Patrick, Bailey, and Helen share the following.

I also talk to my other friends who are totally blind. Others who ya know, I've met a few other people who became sick and ya know and kind of became blind the way I did. I really love having friends who are blind. These people would help me cope too. Ya know, they'd give me really great advice, and their assistance is always so helpful. When you're talking with them, they understand what you're going through. You can't see their facial expression, but know they're listening. I know this may sound mushy, but they're listening with their hearts. I've learned that when I've talked with others who are also

blind, it's helped me cope. Talking is really a method I've used to cope with my loss, and really has helped me. ... After losing most of my vision, it was very depressing. I spend most of my time crying, even though I knew as time would pass, I had n choice but to just move on. You know, though out the time I was really depressed, the most helpful people around me were the best. I met wonderful people that I became friends with. They were totally blind. And one of the things that helped me continue was knowing that if they could it, why couldn't I do it?

-Patrick 18 years-

Talking to others who are like me has really made a difference in so many ways. I know now that I was never alone in the first place. Not only did I have my family, but I had a circle of friends, here at the MAB who were extremely helpful in helping my life get back on track. I mean we're so close that we meet each other on a weekly basis. We talk about everything, and we all feel comfortable disclosing how we're feeling that week, or how it's been lately. It's really great to talk to others who can actually empathize with you.

Their reassurance has really helped me cope with it.

-Bailey 62 years-

Talking to others who are blind, and sharing our experiences with one another has been really helpful for me, and I'm sure others will tell you the same thing. In many ways, they've become my family. We laugh, cry and sometimes just can't shut-up, but it's really great to know that we can do that with each other. ... It's just become much easier to just talk with others who are in your situation.

-Helen 35 years-

Some respondents sought comfort in sharing with others who were not visually impaired notably family and friends. Their endless support became a great source of unconditional love and solace. Friends and counselors also deserve credit for helping the coping process become a lot better. Four respondents share their experiences below.

Ya one of the ways I also cope and have copied ever since I lost vision is by telling stories. When I used to say my stories it wasn't that exciting, but people are amazed about what they hear, about ya know, how I lost my vision. So basically one of my coping skills is that I tell people. That's why I'm talking too much. That's one of the ways I coped cause I tell people what happened to me, and it helps ya know. That's the way I console myself. I am my own counselor. ... It's great when you talk to people about not having such a good day or week. It's also important what other say to you when you begin disclosing personal things about the way you're feeling. I've lost only my vision for the past 7 years. And a lot of people around me ya know, including my parents, family, friends, advisors, and social workers they say I've come a long way, and that I've

adjusted quite a bit. It really feels good to hear them say all these things, even though I know I still have quite a lot of things to improve on. But just talking about really has helped me deal with it all. They were always supportive of me, even when I didn't even believe in myself. My parents were the best. Their love has come a long way.

-Patrick 18 years-

Talking to my wife about my good and not so good experiences has helped me a lot. I know she can't understand me when I tell her that society can be so cruel and damaging. But just letting it all out does help because I know that she's listening to me. Sometimes all it takes is to have someone listen to what you have to say.

-Nelson 31 years-

It's always been important for me to let it all out. In the past, I've gotten carried away, and often found myself shouting and telling people off in the middle of the street, or the subway. I guess was just angry at the world, and I wanted everyone to know about. Don't worry, I don't do that anymore, but I still do enjoy talking with people. I get very attached to people, and find myself sharing my life story with them. It's funny, cuz my husband tells me, 'dear we don't have to share everything.' I mean talking to anyone really helps sometimes. It's helped me before, and will in the future. It's just good to let it all out sometimes, even when you don't really know the person, I think. Just don't tell my husband I said that.

-Deborah 44 years-

I've found someone who, for me had become a father figure. Someone one who I've been seeing for 20 years, the finest human being I've ever met and I'm sure that I'll ever meet. And I was really lucky. When I first started seeing him I was in cegep, and you know how those environments are kind of like a melting pot place. Through my ups and downs, he's always been there. He really is my mentor. I can share absolutely anything with him, and know that he won't judge me in any way. He understands me even though he isn't visually impaired.

-Mary 37 years-

It is quite clear from the respondents above that talking to others who've played a major role in their lives can certainly create a zone of comfort where the talkers can alleviate their sorrows, stresses, and triumphs. Rather than internalizing their pain, they were able to express their feelings and concerns with people who they knew would give them undivided support in return.

The Experimenters (testing your own boundaries)

We often hear of individual risk-takers who enjoy testing their boundaries and limits. Gloria and Deborah escaped adversity by experimenting with choices that would ultimately change their life. They discuss their experiences in the following:

I left home at 21, I couldn't wait for that day to come! Independence! My first time away from parents! Wow, I remember how unsupportive they first were. It was the best thing I ever did. Getting a start to my own way of living. In college, I started hearing that I was attractive and that of course was a thrill. I had never thought of myself as attractive. Now I can see why. In high-school, or in my later teens, I never let myself be in contact with others, especially men. I was always shy, and resentful of girls who had boyfriends. University life was really different. I fully participated in campus life. It was great. I was hanging out with friends who didn't treat me as though I was some kind of helpless case. I felt that we were in some way as equals. They didn't see me as disabled person. Maybe they did, but I never felt disabled when I was with them...I felt attractive for once in my life. And I was getting a lot of attention on campus. I became adaptive to the new environment. In orientation, I got assigned to be the resident mascot. I really started getting noticed. My name was going around campus. Most importantly, I felt like I was really being liked for me. I made friends who I still keep in touch with today. I also got a boyfriend. He was outgoing, and I was flattered that he liked me. I was told he was very good looking. It was my first opportunity to get close to a man. We went out together all the time. I was going out dancing with him and meeting new people. I was finally doing all the stuff I had missed out on as a teenager... I've had men tell me that they won't date women who are visually impaired. Going through a divorce changed a lot. It's been four and half years. I guess I got into my first marriage having a sense that I should settle for what I can get. Some of it has to deal with my disability, and some of it has to do with my upbringing, you know with my parent's negative attitude, They'd always tell him to settle for anyone I could get cuz it's quite unusual for a man who would want to date a blind woman. My marriage didn't work out, and I've told you why before. It was a big step for me to leave my husband. He was overprotective, among other things. It wasn't easy for me to do. Of course, I was worried about being on my own. My life was going to completely change, and I was expecting that too happen, but I wanted to take that risk and start over and become the independent woman I expected myself to be.

-Gloria 39 years-

From Gloria, we learn that when visually impaired persons are overprotected by family members the only way to seek autonomy is by escaping the home in hopes of achieving a desired independent status. In Gloria's case, her mother's willingness to

constantly do things for her is what drove her away to study in a different province. She said that only once she had left home was she able to begin her 'own way of living.' Her college friends made her not feel 'disabled' and 'helpless.' It also changed her way of being with people. Gloria was now interacting and socializing with the in-crowd, something she was not used to doing before. She even discusses her marital life with her ex-husband. Gloria realized time and time after that he was taking on the role of her mother. She admits her mother's influence rubbed off on her decision to marry him in the first place. Four and half years into the marriage she realized that he was the overprotective husband she didn't want. She admits that leaving her husband was a risk she was ready to make, but nonetheless was concerned about doing. However, in the end, she felt the need to do it in order to regain her independence.

Deborah had never engaged in risk taking until she took up dance. She admits that dance has helped her react in space, along with making her more aware of her body. It encouraged her to become less afraid of taking risks and setting boundaries and limitations in life.

I've always been afraid to take risks. Believe me when I say I was never a risk-taker until I started taking up dance. It's made me feel more safe, and more secure, and more solid. Dance has helped me not be afraid of taking risks anymore. It's helped my body learn how to react to space. It's helped me become more aware of my myself and whole body. I've become less afraid of hurting myself. It's really become a whole new world for me. Dance has helped me learn by limits and boundaries, you know, what I am capable of doing. It's helped me release a lot of tension. I know that I could push further and not feel like I am restricting myself in any way. Dance has helped me search for something I've never explored before, something I never knew I had inside of me. It's certainly helped me set some boundaries and acknowledge what my limitations are.

-Deborah 44 years-

Gloria and Deborah teach us that taking risks, whether by leaving home and

studying in another province, or leaving a marriage, or taking up dancing, can be a liberating experience.

The Positivists:

Four of the respondents were very positive about keeping busy with daily tasks. The Positivists realized that coping involved implementing change and structure within certain organizations. In this process of keeping busy, the positivists were also coping. Engaging in different activities did not give them enough time to indulge in the hardships of being visually impaired. The four Positivists explain their feelings below.

I'm actually quite involved now with a lot of things. I'm involved with a few organizations. It's one of the ways I cope. One the ways I cope to keep myself busy. It really is another important coping tool. I'm involved in different organizations. I'm involved in the student organization. It's a French student organization. I've also been the second vice-president for the National Federation of the Blind that advocates for equality in the treating of the visually impaired population. I enjoy keeping busy because it gets my mind off things, and really helps me adjust to difficult situations in my life. It may be that sometimes I won't have enough time to feel down because I'm busy running an organization. Keeping busy can definitely become very helpful.

-Patrick 18 years-

I've accepted the fact that I'm blind and will never see again. I keep doing what I've always done. I still speak nine languages, and play the piano. I'm one of the greatest pianists you could find. I have no problems with keeping busy. I haven't given up on any the associations I belong to before I lost my sight. I'm on the executive board, and now the director of public relations and publicity of one of the largest stamp clubs in North America. I'm also president of an international study unity to do with the geology of stamps. People from practically all over the world belong to it. I attend meetings, and hold chair meetings. I'm very much involved in helping others and I haven't let this loss of sight deter me. I keep busy. I've had sidewalks built where there were none. If you would ask anyone I know, they would tell you I'm the busiest man in Montreal. It helps to keep busy and active. And sometimes you need that so you don't fall apart. At first when I became blind, I thought it was going to be the end of my life. Keeping busy and active helps me learn to adapt and cope with most situations. It's now become a new lifestyle, and a way of helping me adjust to my new circumstance on a regular basis.

-Bailey 62 years-

We learn from Patrick and Bailey that keeping busy and active helps us adapt with coping and adjusting to life's adversities. As Patrick describes in the above, "I enjoy keeping busy because it gets my mind off things and really helps me adjust to difficult situations in my life." Like Patrick, Bailey enjoys keeping busy and active as it helps him to "learn to adapt and cope with most situations."

For others like Kevin and Helen, we learn that keeping busy is also significant in proving that visual impairment does not in any way impede on one's life chances or opportunities. Ultimately we can turn our lives around and decide what path down the road we want to venture in.

I'm always busy, and I think that's a good thing. I'm presently working for an organization that solely assists the visually impaired population. I train blind people to use talking computers. I was also working part-time for the Quebec federation for the Blind as activity coordinator. I also tune pianos during the evening when I have the time. And for most of my life, I've been working as a volunteer for various organizations mostly in raising funds for good causes. Summing up, I don't get much rest., but I think keeping busy has helped me get through a lot of things. It's helped me realize that I'm as functional and independent as the so-called John next door. It proves that I can lead a regular life like anyone else.

-Kevin 41 years-

I've never had self-pity. I refuse to see myself as incompetent. I've also found that my blindness has become a challenge that has helped build my character. My ability to see doesn't make me who I am, it never has, and never will. So I live my life in the present, and to the fullest doing the things that I love to do most. I still do my book reviews, and I never miss a deadline. I also conduct sensitization workshops on disability issues. I do on occasion stand-up comedy shows to raise money for charities. I mean I do lot so things on a regular basis. Sometimes it's hard to keep track of them all. My friends always say that I'm always on the go. It's funny sometimes they say they have to book an appointment with me in order to spend time with me. I admit, it can be crazy at times, but I like keeping busy. I love it. In the past it's helped me cope. When you're busy you don't have time to sit and think about never being able to see again. It's really helped me a lot....

-Helen 35 years-

We learn from all four respondents that keeping busy has helped them cope with the daily adversities of being visually impaired. For two of the respondents, it helped them realize that they were not incompetent because of their visual impairment. Their positive outlook and determination motivated them to accomplish what they have always been determined to do.

The Activists

The misconceptions about visual impairment are staggeringly substantial. Eight of the twelve respondents have become political activists in some form or another by becoming a member of an organization, workshop, or committee that advocates the rights of the visually impaired. Their continuing determination to stand up for themselves and others have helped inform and heighten the awareness about visual impairment as a key to challenging the stigma of difference. The more information on visual impairment available to the public, the more people will be respectful of the unconventional appearance and the consequences of living with a visual impairment. They insisted that others should not debase them according to their visual acuity, and they have become strong supporters of resisting maltreatment. The following Activists discuss their advocating experiences.

I'm an activist all right! Call me stubborn, ambitious, and positive. They said I wouldn't make it in school, and they were of course wrong as hell. I graduated with honours. Hard work certainly does pay off. I'm especially persistent and don't let anything get me down. Right now I'm a member of the Canadian Council with Disabilities. I'm an activist trying to improve the quality of life the blind are exposed to in our society. I'm especially fighting for how the education system could better improve the lives of visual impaired students. I really enjoy meeting other people at conferences and being part of workshops that become very productive. These conferences are great because you get a perspective from different paradigms.

-Melissa 23 years-

Both Bailey and Helen have become heavily involved in sensitization workshops aimed at increasing public awareness on visual disability. They discuss the specifics of their workshops:

I've had to make allowances for sighted people, and they have to make allowances for me being blind. I live with my blindness and know how it can be. So I've vowed to help out these people any way I can. And that's why I hold sensitization workshops at the organization I volunteer in. I try and let people know that people who are visually handicapped can also lead a normal life, but need society's help in so many ways to open the doors. I think it's important to educate people and give them the right tools in order for them to realize the normal day to day routine that we go through on a continuing basis. I think the hardest thing I've had to do is go into high-schools and talk to young adolescents about what it's like to deal live with a visual impairment. We want to sensitize them as to what happens to a blind person. I usually get two or three volunteers and there's always volunteers from a young group. They always want to participate. We blind fold them in front of the class and they have to find their way back to their desk. Then we ask them to locate a book on their desk and of course, I tell them, 'turn to page 87.' Then they realize they can't. And all of a sudden they realize that it's not that easy being blind. And then I teach them in a nice and friendly way, how they could help people like me. ... I've had sidewalks built in my community where there were none. It takes much challenges in dealing with the bureaucracy of a municipality in getting them to install delayed traffic lights, bells and whistles on lights to enable not only blind persons, but people on wheelchairs and young mothers with babies on strollers to crossroads without the feeling that would be endangering their lives. I've also been fortunate in the city of Pointe-Claire where I live, they've been most helpful there, but there is 1 more light post they have to do for me and I'm meeting a bit of resistance but I'm coping with that.

-Bailey 62 years-

I'm really into the sensitivity and awareness programs that are out there to educate the public about people with disabilities. I think it's so important it's like learning proper etiquette. And that's what I wanted to do especially when I lost my sight. My workshops are informative, but they're also around to really help people understand that people with disabilities could get around to doing things, but may need an some extra special ways to get around to doing these things. These sensitization workshops are also there to help the disabled adapt to the training they will need at their new work environment. It gets employers to also be involved so they can understand what needs to be done for the disabled in order to for them to work in an inviting and user-friendly eco-work environment. This is really important so that the both employers and employees understand what's expected from each other. ... They're also informed as to what their rights are as an employee, and what they should be guaranteed from their employer. It's

interesting to listen to the questions people have. Some of them have no clue as what's expected from their employer. Sometimes after the workshops I have a few people come up to tell me they've always had such a negative attitude about how to expect the work-environment to be. These sessions have become eye openers and positive reinforcers for many of them. It's good to know that my workshops has become informative and positive for many. Creating awareness and sensitization workshops influences policy making and it changes perceptions and actions change awareness. And that pleases me. Activism and awareness create change at the grass roots starting from bottom up.

-Helen 35 years-

Both Helen and Bailey stress the importance of activism where awareness encourages change in attitudes. We learn from Bailey that awareness should begin early in a child's life. Exposing the young population sets the ground the for early learning and awareness. Bailey also examines what society could do to implement change in order to meet the expectations of the visually impaired and other groups. We learn that if society advocates full rights to the visually impaired, they should also design the city in a eco-friendly matter which would permit the visually impaired to have easier access for traveling from one location to the next. This is why he had sidewalks built and traffic lights installed.

Helen stresses the importance of having employers request sensitization workshops on issues that stress the vitality of addressing the needs of the visually disabled in the work-environment. We learn from Helen that unless employers are willing to stress the importance of having these workshops, there will be no awareness of what certain disabled groups require in different work-environments. And if this happens, it will only show how unwilling employers to be inclusive of the visually impaired.

Patrick has also become an Activist in helping improve the lives of visually impaired persons. His continual effort to heighten public awareness has made him become

involved in several organizations, and become an active counselor in a camp that provides rehabilitation to visually impaired students.

I'm really proud of myself. I've done so much to make a difference. I know Oprah says, 'you should live your best life,' and I'm taking her advice, however corny it may sound. One major accomplishment in my life was being given the opportunity to go back to that camp that I talked to you earlier about, you know the 1999, the year Wayne Gretsky retired. I was given the opportunity to work there's a computer trainer and counselor. It was great to go back and help counsel those kids who were so depressed. Cause when I went there, there were a couple of people who were quite down and depressed about their blindness. I spent a lot of time with them, and before you know it, summer was over and my first counseling job was over. Some of the kids I worked with thanked me for helping them. Actually, one of them said, 'you saved my life.' That meant so much, and I get pretty emotional when I talk about it. She was really special, and it feels great to know that I really helped someone. I was involved in so many wonderful things like, how to help kids build their self-confidence. I was also a computer trainer. I was one of the instructors who taught the kids how to use word processing, windows. It was a great challenge, one of the best ones yet that I'm really proud of because it helped others who were once feeling as low as I was. ... I also believe that people with disabilities should have the same equal rights as everybody else. It's only fair! I also think that it's important that some organizations like the MAB have adolescents like me representing my age population. They also need to understand how blindness affects people from various age groups. There might be specific things our age group might need. It's for this reason that I got on the board of members at the MAB, I'm basically their student rep. This past years I was also a student rep of the disabled student council at my cegep. I'm a side coordinator, and I started the young adult post secondary student support group for visually impaired students. We also have the adult student support group for the visually impaired. I guess you could say that I think it's important to help people of my own kind, and also to make the public aware that we're people too who want to do what they're doing. I also think it's important to support and help other visually impaired people. I remember when I started off in counseling, it was great to have someone counsel me who had already gone through what I was first experiencing. It became a relief to know that I wasn't on my own. So it's important to give back to the community.

-Patrick 18 years-

Patrick asserts that it's important to give back to the community. This is why he decided to become the Activist in helping out with counseling, computer training, and advocating visually impaired students' rights. It is important for the community but also for Patrick.

Like Patrick, Kevin also has sought to help others.

I know how difficult it may be to start from scratch and re-learn how to tackle all the simple things in life. It wasn't easy to take the rehabilitation courses, but I dealt with it quite well back then. Funny enough, I married a rehabilitation teacher who taught me how well it felt to help others. Today I've become part of a like of helping others. The rest is history. I still help others but now I do it professionally. I've made it a commitment to helping others. I train others in computer access. That means I train blind people to use computers that talk. I make sure that they have fully mastered the computer skills they will eventually need for the workforce. I've spent most of my life working as a volunteer for various organizations mostly in fund-raising. I'm there to help in any way that I can. I'm there to give back. I'm always there to lend a helping hand.

-Kevin 41 years-

Kevin and Patrick insist that it is easier to help others when you've gone through their experiences. Their willingness to help others is their way of giving back to the visually impaired community.

Gloria and Valerie have also been actively involved in implementing change in specific organizations that could eventually contribute to the well-being of the visually impaired population. They share their experiences below.

It's hard to go restaurants because of the degree of prejudice and ignorance. I was sick of being turned down at restaurants. I threatened to call the police on various occasions because the law permits it. I've been thrown out of restaurants because of owner's unwillingness to accept guide dogs. That just makes me sick to my stomach. Laws that are made to intentionally help the visually impaired don't always work. Like it's okay to allow us to go into restaurants with our guide dogs, but not have a braille menu for us to choose our food from. Why not have braille menus? Is it because we're not too important because we only represent a small percentage of the population? This really bugged me and I wanted to have a chance to talk to some restaurant owners about establishing braille menus for the visually impaired population. It's not like they would have to make a lot. They'd probably see one out of hundred visually impaired in a day, if any. So I had a friend who has a friend that owns a restaurant. She spoke to her about me and my ideas about having braille menus in restaurants. Anyway, to make a long story short, I've been working close with her and she's gonna start having braille menus. I've contacted this place who would be willing to help her out with it, you know giving her a good price and everything. Anyway, this owner is gonna spread then news to her other friends who own restaurants, and hopefully they too will spread the news. I've also talked to someone

at the MAB about including in our regular newsletter all restaurants that are have braille menus. I'd like to say that they're helping us, and we're also helping them with clientele.

How great will it be to order for myself for a change. It will make us all feel more independent, you know, like we really matter even though we represent a small minority of the population.

-Gloria 39 years-

We learn from Gloria that most public spaces are not inviting to the visually impaired population. As a result, this adds an extra burden on the visually impaired society. By working with one restaurant on implementing braille menus, she's helped open the doors to others who may wish to implement braille menus in their restaurants. This could soon lead to a policy change for all restaurants to require braille menus. This awareness also acknowledges them as full members of society.

Valerie has also kept busy by becoming an Activist in implementing change in order to help students. As a student, she recalls not having had enough guidance for the outside world. Presently, she runs a follow-up program where she remains in contact with students who have since graduated and have been working in the labor market. As a vocation officer at a university, she ensures that employer and employee relations operate smoothly. She explains it in the following.

I wanted to go into vocational development because I know how difficult it may be for a visually impaired person to go out there at look for a job. I used to be one of them, so I know exactly how it feels. Yes, I know the government has helped us by furnishing us with talking computers but that really is not enough. They tell us, okay you want to be a social worker, you have to study for it, and then you have to look for the job yourself. You go to a counselor, they try and polish your c.v. , and that's about it! And the problem is the visually impaired need more than that to move on in the world. You know when you're blind there are restrictions about what you can do, and what you need to look out for in the labor market. We need to give more attention to the visually impaired. Helping them find a job is important, but following up with them to ensure that things are running smoothly really helps too. Sometimes people have had difficulties because they haven't been able to move around a lot like sighted people. Their opportunities have become

restricted. And that's becoming more of a problem. Counselor don't follow up with them. I've had people tell me, that part of their job consists of writing reports. Some employers request that it be done before half an hour like everyone else. These employers fail to understand how they're not just ordinary people! They're gonna need more than half an hour to write up that damn report. And then on their evaluation they say you're not doing as well as the others. Sometimes it's as though they do it on purpose and then and let them go and use the old excuse of how, 'you just didn't meet up with to the work expectations.' It's a load of crap and they know it. That's why I got into vocation development at the university. I want to make sure that visually impaired students are getting a fair shot out there. I follow up with them to ensure that everything is working well in the favor. I also examine on a periodical basis the work conditions and relations at the job. I also remain in close relation with the employer. They also keep up-to-date on what we can do to help them out in making things better for their employee. It becomes a process, and I mean a continuing process. It's good to get their feedback when they come back to see me at one of the workshops. They tell me it keeps getting better at work. Sometimes the feedback is not always so good because sometimes employers just don't care. They say they'll do something, but never end doing it. Nonetheless, I take my job very seriously, and I'm there to make sure it works out well at work, and if it doesn't, what can I do to make things better.

-Valerie 42 years-

Many blind persons are active in the community and in many ways at various levels. Melissa works with the Canadian Council of Disabilities, Bailey and Helen hold sensitization workshops, and Bailey pressures municipalities about crossing lights and sidewalks. Patrick has worked at a youth camp as a counselor, and both Patrick and Kevin train others in computer skills. Gloria is trying to implement Braille menus in restaurants, and Valerie is working at a university to facilitate visually impaired students. Clearly, there is a lot to do, and the visually impaired are tackling the problems one by one, with some success.

The Self -Acceptors

The self-acceptors are comfortable with their physical difference and have not let their visual acuity dissuade them from living a normal life. They realize they are

productive, and have the capacity to live fruitful lives even though society may not always assist them in this path.

The Self-Acceptors, like the Positivists, have engaged in regular activities. They've acquired years of experiences in which they have learnt the skills needed to cope with any adversities they encounter in the road of life. These skills have contributed to their positive attitude. Eleven of the twelve respondents report being self-acceptors. In the following, they elaborate on their knowledge.

I realized that I'm just like anyone else. Although I may be blind, I can still function very well, and at times more efficiently than a sighted person. I accepted my blindness gradually when I realized it wouldn't prevent me from living a normal life. I realized that only once I accepted my blindness did I become happy with my life. Adjusting became easier. ... I don't let prejudice or discrimination get in my way. I've experienced it, but it really has made me a stronger person.

-Mark 45 years-

You learn your way, or should I say, you learn to find your own special way. Adjusting is the ability for the human being to adapt to the cards. You adapt to your disability, and soon you will look for the positives and deal with the negatives. You give up some, but if you alter your way, you realize things happen for a reason. God gives you challenges to face, and what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I've coped with my blindness, humour has been very helpful, but I've finally accepted it. You have to be ready in life for stuff like this to happen. You learn to adapt, it's human truism. We're born with an instinct to survive, and these instinct kick in. Life could be the most interesting thing when you're blind. Someone is always worse off than you. It's relative. This happened for a reason. I find that my diabetes is more of disability than my blindness. It's always there, and I can never let my diabetes get away, I got off easy. So when you think in that way, it's not so bad. I'm organized because it's a necessity, and I'm not complaining life is great ... From my experience, once I accepted my blindness, I was better able to adjust to the fact that I was no longer going to see. This also encouraged me to take my rehabilitation courses. Yeah I know that sometimes there can be life's irritations, like wearing two different boots. But I really appreciate what the color blue looks like. My boyfriend was born blind so if I tell him that I dreamt of white clouds he'll say that means nothing to him because he's never seen white clouds. ... I think we've all experienced discrimination at some point in our lives. It's made me more aware of what's out there. And has not in any way prevented me from living. It's actually made me a stronger person.

-Helen 35 years-

Both Mark and Helen have not let this loss of sight deter them from living a regular life. They've accepted the fact that they will never see again. Fortunately, this reason has not prevented them from functioning adequately. Helen says that blindness becomes relative, because as she states in her own words, "Someone is always worse off than you." Both Self-Acceptors also agree that people's ignorance, and the discrimination they've endured in the past has only made them stronger. Responding to the adjustment of blindness and all its package is a form of 'human truism' where you are tested to adapt to life's circumstances.

Similarly, Bailey has not let his loss of sight stop him from living productively. In addition, he insists that discrimination has not prevented him from achieving his goals.

Bailey explains:

I've accepted the fact that I'm blind and will never see again. Accepting it was very important because it made everything a lot easier. It made me want to do things for myself. I keep doing what I've always done. I still speak nine languages, and play the piano. I'm one of the greatest pianists you could find. I haven't given up any of the associations I belonged to before I lost my sight. I'm very much involved in helping others, and I haven't let this loss of sight deter me. I realize that I could no longer fly a plane, but there is no reason why I should stop collecting stamps. I have many friends in the stamp club that are helping me with my imagination. With their descriptive narrative, they're able to tell me what's what. Society has to understand that just because I'm blind, doesn't mean it's changed my attitude toward life. There are many blind people who are totally dependent, and then there are those like myself that strive for independence. We just want to be able to carry on with our lives the best way we can. For the most part, when I hear someone say, 'Oh my God, he's lost his sight,' if I recognize their voice, I always say to them, 'just say hello.' ...I've got practically everyday well organized to do different thing and that's very important. So that's how I coped then and now. I can't sit and listen to music ever hour of every day. I can't sit and read braille every minute of the day. I have to do a mixture of things like everybody else does, so that it doesn't become a dull day. My life is quite full of excitement. If you ask me, I'm probably the busiest man in Montreal. ... I think that the discrimination I've experienced has made me a stronger

person. I've dealt with it quite well normally, but I have to say that until I really accepted my blindness I wasn't able to cope with it as well.

-Bailey 62 years-

It is obvious that Bailey can no longer fly a plane, however, he finds other ways of maintaining his regular activities. He admits that acceptance has motivated him to experience life with a positive outlook. Bailey emphasizes that having experienced discrimination has made him a stronger person. He also details that dealing with it successfully is a result of having accepted his blindness.

For Deborah, Nelson, Valerie, Kevin, Melissa, and Doug, accepting their blindness brought life expectancies into perspective. They all realize that without accepting their blindness they would not be able to succeed in life's endeavors. Accepting was not always the easiest thing to consider but it certainly puts ideas about life choices into perspective.

Acceptance was difficult at first, but when I finally did experience it, things got a lot better. Accepting my blindness made my life easier because it prepared me for what I needed to do next. I was ready to take the necessary steps in order to get my life back into shape. It wasn't easy, but it helped. Accepting it, also made me feel less like the different one in whatever I chose to do. I'm doing exactly what I want.

-Deborah 44 years-

Deborah suggests that once there is acceptance, feelings of being the odd one may disappear since you are engaging in several activities that other regular people resume to.

For Nelson, acceptance came with an adjustment on a personal level. He realized that listening to others is essential in trying to understand them, and that visual impairment may help you decide what becomes the most important things in life.

I accept and embrace it. I did at first, and still do today. I keep in my mind that there are much worse fates in life and go with my day. I still cope with my blindness in the same way, but I have experience and maturity to help me as well as my positive outlook. Most of the important adjustments that I have made more on a personal level. I have learned

to really listen to people. Not just hear. It has been a long but fruitful road, but well worth it. Minor things like taking my time getting to places, had been great because I really take my time and enjoy what I am doing. This had translated in most everything I do. All the changes that my blindness has brought me are a blessing. The changes have allowed me to learn the most important things in my life. This would be different for each person because their blindness affects them differently.... I could say that the greatest thing I've learned about my blindness is that it is part of who I am, I accept it fully to its fullest extent. It has helped develop my inner sense of self.

-Nelson 31 years-

From Nelson we learn that once priorities are set for one's life it will affect your perspective and choices you make. And only once a visually impaired person has accepted their blindness would they have the strength to develop an inner sense of self.

Valerie adds that along with her acceptance of blindness, came the adjustment of realizing her potential limits and boundaries. Although she could live a normal lifestyle, there are certain life events that she has no control over. For instance, she expresses concern over having no control over the possibility of her children carrying the gene that caused her blindness. She explains as follows:

I learned to accept my disability. And at a young age, I knew that's what I had to do in order for me to go on with my life. Accepting it made it so much easier to learn how to do things for myself. I applied myself so much better and that really helped me adjust. When you ask me what's the greatest thing I've learned about my visual impairment, I find it's difficult for me to understand that question because for me, I'm just like everybody else. The fact that I'm blind has taught me an important lesson in life. Before I had children, I had the capacity to do many things, it was easy for me. However, when I found out that two of my children may possibly have glaucoma in the future, this was very hard for me to accept. For the first time in my life, I felt as though I had a limit imposed on me, something I didn't have no control over. This taught me a lot of things about my limits as a parent. I realized that I couldn't prevent this from happening to my children. For me, the problem is not that I cannot see colors, but that may be the case for another. This experience has taught me to learn about the limits that I do have, cause I thought there were none. But this still does not stop me from living. ... Living with a disability is not as difficult as it seems to be, you can still do everything you want, but the means as doing these things are different. Length of time may be shorter, or longer, it depends on how I do it... I have a great job, and great life. I'm ambitious, goal oriented, stubborn, and I

don't let anything get me down. I just finished my master's, and I'm aiming for a PH.D, in what, who I knows. I just know I could do it. I have a loving husband, great children, and successful career, life couldn't get any better.

-Valerie 42 years-

This disability has not prevented Valerie from moving forward in life. Visually impaired persons can still accomplish tasks, though the process of getting the tasks completed may be more lengthy. It should not in any way determine what kind of lifestyle they should lead. For her, "Life couldn't get any better."

For Kevin defending oneself against verbal taunts, or abusive remarks was only possible once he had accepted his visual impairment.

I began very young to accept the fact that I would not see some day. I knew that I couldn't do anything about it, so I immediately accepted it. Acceptance was so important. If I wouldn't face reality and accept it, this would make things so much more difficult for me. Acceptance encouraged me to learn to do things so I could become independent again. It helped me to stand up to myself. I don't tolerate abusive remarks. I become quite vocal. ... A physically handicapped friend once told me many years ago that if I learnt to handle it properly, I could cash in on my handicap. I don't really like to do it, but if I have to, I will use it to my benefit. I guess that's the greatest thing I've learned about my blindness. I don't consider myself disabled, I consider myself differently-abled and I don't care what others think of me. I know I've been the target of discrimination, but I don't let that stop me from living.

-Kevin 41 years-

Like Kevin, Melissa accepts her blindness. She admits that acceptance of the disability can make things a lot better in life. Indeed she suggests that not all visually impaired persons would readily accept a cure for blindness if it were out there. Some individuals may feel comfortable with it and may not desire a cure.

I learned to accept my blindness a very long time ago. It helped put things into perspective. Like once I did finally accept it, I was ready to be happy. When you accept, everything feels so much better. I feel great today, and maybe in a month I'll be depressed, it's like a roller-coaster, you have your ups and downs. But this disability

does not stop me from living my life. ... I can't stand it when people don't understand myself or others in the same situation who don't feel the need to change. I like the way I am. I hate to hear, 'isn't there a cure?' If a cure was out there, I don't know if I'd take it, I like who I am.

-Melissa 23 years-

Like the rest of the Self-Acceptors, Doug realizes that visual impairment may not always work against him. Society may not always be the answer for unsuccessful events in our lives. For instance, he uses the example of not being hired for a job because he was not qualified for it.

I've accepted my blindness. Through my experience, I've learned that accepting means you're ready to move on and live a normal life and that's exactly what I've been doing. I know I'm perfectly capable of doing what I want in this world. I don't need anyone telling me what I should and should not do. Accepting my visual impairment helps me adjust to unexpected events in my life. I know that if I wasn't hired for a job it's most probably because I wasn't qualified for it, and not because of my blindness. I see myself as regular person.... I'm not sure if this exactly constitutes learning about my visual impairment, but I've learned not to take the things in my life for granted. We don't know how much loner we can enjoy the things we love, so we have to take advantage of them right away.

-Doug 19 years-

Gloria asserts that along with 'acceptance comes learning.' Although she has gained contentment with who she is, she realizes that the 'sighted world is not bad after all.' She says that there needs to be an openness about what disabled people can do. Through her experience, she's realized that her blindness will not in any way prevent her from doing the things she loves most, like running marathons. As a Self-Acceptor, Gloria realizes that only her choices in life could prevent her from living a productive lifestyle. She explains it best in the following.

As time goes in, I've gained a sense of myself and contentment with who I am and it matters less and less what other people think of me. I lost friends, and I let friendships slip away because I'm more committed with important friends. I'm also not used to being

very concerned with my appearance. And I'm proud to say that I'm much less concerned with how people think of me. The sighted world isn't so bad after all. Bad things don't always happen to me because I'm blind. Acceptance comes with learning. A trying person makes you a better person. I've learned that there needs to be an openness about what disabled people can do. I'm proud of who I am, and I've come to terms with accepting my disability. Accepting it becomes important because it sets the foundation for adjustment in so many ways. What I mean is, I know I'm able to work and live a regular life because I've accepted my blindness. ... I always take areas where I excel. For example, I know I can dance. And I know that I can do it well. This is my one bit of glory. I admit it, I can't see, but I can dance. I've also ran a couple of marathons, international marathons too. I was on the news, and it got me some recognition. So, I'm not feeling down. I've always been athletic, I've ran in Toronto, but I loved running in Montreal. Montreal's hot better character. I love it! When I'm walking or jogging, it causes a lot of attention. I feel people are always sneering. I love it cuz that opens people's eyes to what people like me can do! We've also got passion and devotion. I've been part of many running clubs. I'll always have something! I'm an achiever, and no one can stop me, or stand in my way of getting what I want, most of the time anyway. I use this to build my self confidence. Unlike job search and family where certain people have tried to stop me from doing what I love to do most.

-Gloria 39 years-

Patrick realizes that acceptance has played a major role in his adjustment to blindness. Patrick demonstrates that acceptance may allow many visually impaired to reflect on their life choices and on those things that really matter in life. For instance, learning from our mistakes so they're not repeated in the future becomes a valuable asset. And as time passes, with experience, some visually impaired persons become stronger through the years. Patrick admits that this is a continual process.

It wasn't easy in the beginning, but with some time and support, I soon began to realize that living with my visual impairment wasn't going to be so bad after all. ... I understand that I have a few things to say about that question. It has taught me that I should learn from my mistakes, even from those people who make mistakes around my life. It also means making sure that I don't make that mistake in the future, down the road. Friendship is also a valuable thing, and having people around you when you need them the most is so important. And most importantly, having good friends, cuz good friends will always be there for you. There are people who come and go in your life, but your true friends are always there for you. The second thing, is well, looking back at all the experiences I've had so far, including losing my vision and everything have made , I

guess as times goes on, I can't really say, it has made me a stronger person. I don't want to say that. I want to say it has, as times goes on, it's making me more of a stronger person, more and more.... I guess after I lost my vision, I was born again. With all the things I have had to go through, all the services and health that I had to acquire to regain my health. I think that's what helped me become born again. And I wish to grow, I mean I've just recently been born. At this point, I think I've only lost most of my vision for the past seven years, so I think I can say I've been living for seven years in the dark. So I'm still quite young in that sense. Yeah, it's interesting, challenging. I don't really use the work hard, like I said before cause its much more negative and people think of it quite negatively. People hear the word hard and they try to run away from it. I personally consider anything hard challenging. That's what I tell people.

-Patrick 18 years-

The self-acceptors are forthright in explaining the importance of turning a permanent life event into an opportunity to be sought. Their attitudes have largely contributed to the fact why all eleven of them have become productive human beings, and successful in their own lives. All eleven Self-Acceptors have eloquently recounted that their adversities have made them become emotionally stronger people.

We learn from the Self-Acceptors that life opportunities are dependant upon one's effective determination and enthusiasm to accept blindness. Their experiences indicate that blind people can readily learn to become efficient members of society.

Only one of the twelve respondents did not accept her blindness. Mary shows that not all visually impaired persons cope with their blindness in a positive manner. There may be many reasons allocated to such feelings. In Mary's case, the feeling of not seeing herself as a 'whole' person has made her blindness difficult to accept. As a result this detaches her from socializing with the outside world.

I haven't really accepted my blindness. And maybe that's why I haven't adjusted that well. And maybe that's why I haven't done all the things I wanted to do. It's been like this most of my life. I don't know if I'll ever accept it because I often feel like some sort of defect, like I'm not a whole person. ... Not having accepted it has made things difficult in

*my life. I think in so many ways it might be the reason why I don't do much with people.
I'm not a social bird outside of work. It's really hard for me.*

-Mary 37 years-

Concluding Remarks:

People cope with blindness in different ways and at different stages. From the data presented in this chapter, we learn that there are many factors that contribute to the physical and emotional adjustment of blindness. Data from my respondents indicate that family support has become a major source in heightening facilitation towards acceptance and rehabilitation. Once people can accept their blindness, then rehabilitation is the next viable source in helping them adjust to life's circumstances to regain independence. Rehabilitation is an essential source in dealing with the physical and emotional up-downs.

The data presented indicates that there may be eight different type of responses and reactions to deal with daily adversities, such as discrimination and stigmatization. I've learnt that these strategies can be developed at different stages of their life. Of course, engaging in one or more strategies is possible as different situations may evoke specific type of reactions.

The Isolates were quick to isolate themselves from the general public in order to avoid, or not confront the possibility of discrimination. In some cases, respondents isolated themselves to escape the verbal taunts and humiliating confrontations with peers and the general public. Isolation brought upon feelings of loneliness, disconnectedness, and not belonging. For one of the respondents it gave her insight to stop feeling sorry for herself and deal with life's confrontations. Having kept herself in isolation only made her resist the helpless life she no longer endured living.

The Rebels were quick to verbally and physically attack individuals they found to be threatening to their well being. Justification for this reaction was based on their sense of relief for getting back at others who wanted to harm them. In certain situations, the two respondents felt it to be the best weapon for defense against prejudice and verbal violence.

The Self-Entertainers were willingly keeping themselves busy in order to avoid the daily adversities, or feelings they avoided to cope with. Keeping busy left them no time to deal with adversities. Some of the activities they engaged ranged from, daydreaming to listening to music, to playing piano, to dance, humor, and hanging on to memories. All three strategies discussed above were displayed attitudes that did not display verbal assertiveness in a positive manner. Contemplative assertiveness was exercised by those individuals who engaged in experimenting, talking, and accepting.

The Talkers found solace in discussing their adjustment and adversities to others who also had endured similar circumstances. Dismissing personal experiences with others who shared their pain became comforting. Respondents agreed that it would be easier to disclose with others who could empathize with them since they underwent similar ordeals. Other respondents also found solace in disclosing adversities to significant others. Family members provided unconditional love and support. This became a viable source of encouragement to accept and adjust to life's circumstances. It was with their family members that they were unable to unload their adversities. Their families provided a safe haven and assured them of being accepted unconditionally.

The Experimenters tested their limits and boundaries by experimenting with life events that would ultimately lead to life changing choices. For instance, for one of the

respondents leaving home and residing in a new environment to escape an overprotected world became necessary in order to regain independence.

The Positivists engaged in several activities to keep themselves occupied. Keeping busy helps deal with the hardships in one's life. However, it also makes them realize that blindness does not impede on their life's opportunities and chances.

The Activists, were adept in shrugging off any prejudice or other adversities they encountered. They were vocal activists who were willing to advocate for disability rights, and involved in raising public awareness, and implementing policy changes to ameliorate the conditions of the blind in society. In sum, they resisted maltreatment and worked hard to help the blind community by volunteering in organizations, workshops, or by becoming an active agent in implementing social policy change for the good of the visually impaired population.

The Self-Acceptors have fully accepted their condition and realize that there are circumstances attached to being legally blind. They have a solid inner-sense of self that has preserved and encouraged security and enthusiasm for the world. They agree to living a productive lifestyle. Most importantly, they do not permit adversities, such as discrimination and prejudice to get in the way of achieving and producing successfully in life.

Most of the respondents have engaged in more than two of the responses. Some expressed the desire to be more 'active' while one is still working on at being 'self-accepting.' These eight typologies become essential elements of personal change. The blind have developed these coping mechanisms at various circumstances throughout their

lives. Nonetheless, these typologies should not be regarded as mutually exclusive, since for many instances, the rebels have defended themselves with verbal assertion, while on other occasions, the more unassertive respondents have found themselves isolating from others around them. The dominant strategy many change over time. All respondents at some time or another may engage in these coping mechanisms to respond to certain situations.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings:

The twelve respondents who participated in this study have shared their stories of what it's like to be blind and live in a society where visual disability is a target for discrimination and prejudice. Their anecdotes and experiences have revealed that people who are visually impaired have become marginalized in society, but they have nonetheless developed coping mechanisms to manage and confront the many adversities they are faced with. My participants describe not only the hardships of the physical and emotional rehabilitation of blindness, but also the different types and degrees of discrimination and prejudice in several arenas of life, such as, in the family, education, work, relationships, and public environment.

Each chapter takes us through different stages of the respondents life. We learn that in general, the family setting provided respondents with a safe haven to turn to in good times and in bad times. Most family members were supportive, accepting, and understanding of the respondents' disability. The families' positive attitudes toward acquiring the necessary life skills in order to re-gain independence helped them achieve the goals they set out for themselves. In essence, they contributed to the relearning of their life skills that eventually would improve their standard daily life routines. However, as respondents stepped out of the oasis niche, they soon realized that the world beyond their home would make them feel unacceptably different.

As respondents enrolled in regular mainstream elementary schools, they endured name-calling, teasing, as well as different forms of victimization. In most cases,

respondents felt afflicted with loneliness and detached from other classmates. From 'special guest to outcast' respondents were victims of derogatory terms.

As respondents moved on to high-school, they experienced more physical violence, discrimination and prejudice. During this period teachers became much less understanding towards their visual difficulties, while some classmates became curious about their visual tendencies and posed questions. Respondents who recounted negative experiences of school hostility were likely to indicate they were neglected and isolated. They found themselves ignored, and cast themselves from the rest of their classmates. Self-isolation came as a result. Respondents also felt as though they were not provided with the necessary materials to integrate them into class-text material. Having been removed from a regular high-school and placed in a rehabilitation school also contributed to feelings of loneliness and isolation. In sum, respondents expressed frustration with teachers and peers. Not surprisingly, the respondents recounted how experiences of school hostility led to isolation.

Dating was difficult during the teenage years. Most of the respondents attribute this to the lack of social ties with other peers of their own age, especially with the opposite sex. During adolescence, most respondents believed that they are 'rejected' from dating others because of their visual impairment. This belief contributed to specific actions taken by respondents. Many reported not speaking to the opposite sex, which in turn made it difficult for them to have any relationship at all with the opposite sex. They also explained how their physical appearance was the main factor that caused their unpopularity. Relationships improved during adulthood. However, most respondents agreed that their

significant others's constant need to control their lifestyle was negative for the relationship. It contributed to making them feel shamelessly devoured as their significant others' role became that of a 'care-taker.' The climate of the relationship developed in a positive peek when the spouses realized that their very own perceptions of blindness were unrealistically impeding on them having a successful marriage.

Adulthood has not alleviated the emotional pain of discrimination nor prejudice. Respondents reported having been discriminated against in the workplace because of their visual impairment. Discrimination in the workforce pertained to both the hiring bias and differential treatment in the work environment. In most cases, the respondents encountered discouraging employers. They expressed feelings of frustration as employers continuously stressed their limitations while overlooking their abilities. Other respondents had overcome the obstacle of getting employed, but still had to face the derogatory and disrespecting comments made by colleagues. To add to the already amounted stress, the conditions and organization of their work environment made it all the more difficult to adapt to the working conditions. It appears that organizations and employers often fail to consider the needs of the visually impaired population in the work-environment.

The blind are also confronted with public discrimination on a regular basis. All respondents reported unpleasant and offensive encounters with strangers. These ranged from verbal assumptions about their ability to function independently, to insulting and embarrassing moments, and physical acts of violence. Most of the respondents say that they constantly need to reassure others that they are functional human beings.

Despite the different hardships the blind are faced with many have developed

coping mechanisms. My research has identified eight principal methods of coping with their blindness, and also against discrimination. The Isolates, The Rebels, The Talkers, The Self-Entertainers, The Experimenters, The Positivists, The Activists, and The Self-Acceptors. These eight different types of responses and reactions to resistance to the stigmatization of visual impairment are essential elements of personal change and even possibly social change. Many of the respondents engaged in several of these coping mechanisms when encountered with specific situations. They have developed these coping strategies at various circumstances throughout their lives. The coping mechanisms are developed in order to adjust to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of blindness, along with adapting to major environments: family, school, intimacy, and workplace.

These different strategies of reaction and resistance reflect the theoretical insight of both Goffman and disability studies. Goffman has emphasized both the presentation of self, and the concealment of self in his work while the new disability studies has refined Goffman's 'normals' as the problem.

The sociological significance of the research is threefold: although there have been some personal narratives on blindness written by as Helen Keller and Stephen Kuusisto, and some survey research on blindness, this is I think the first in depth qualitative and comparative analysis of blindness.

Second, this is also the first to explore not only the conventional aspects of prejudice and discrimination, but also resistance to these, and the technical and social coping mechanisms of the blind.

Third, while Goffman really opened up the field of stigmatization studies both in

1963, and the 'Presentation of Self' in 1959, his focus was primarily on the individual as having or being a social problem. Despite his sympathy for the individual, I have followed the new Disability Studies pioneered by UPIAS (1976), Oliver (1980), and Abberly (1987) which defines the majority of society as the problem. In the medical model of disability, the blind were once seen 'defective,' and were often segregated or ghettoized in special facilities. This resulted in segregation, isolation, and infantilization of the disabled population. The medical model focussed on body abnormality and functional limitation. Goffman's theory has its roots in the medical historical approach. His theory attests to how the blind are seen as they possess an undesired differentness from other members of society. Their new identity establishes them as discreditable. They have become the social problem of society. With the introduction of a new disability studies movement, the conceptual framework offered an understanding whereby disability is viewed as a social construct. It is not the blindness that impedes on one's own level of productivity, however, but society is the one that imposes on the disabled society which limits their opportunities to participate as functional and independent societal members. In sum, the root problem is society, and not in the disabled person. Hence, the solution lies not in the person with the impairment, but in the person without the disability. In the disability studies, the seers are the problem and not the blind.

This research has shown how the blind cope with these social problems whom Goffman called the "normals." Normals and normality are the principal problem for the blind so they say. They have to learn how to deal with them and they do. Finally, despite sympathy that the non blind may have for the blind, most of my respondents rejected it,

whether it came from families or lovers. Help might be useful, and also fairness at work and school, but not sympathy. And many discussed not only how much they had learned from their blindness, but also how much 'stronger' or 'better' they were as individuals from their experiences.

My research findings have brought me to conclude that although the blind are constantly adjusting to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of blindness, and to discrimination, they resist stigma of difference and disability. All respondents lead normal and productive lives. They have shared their experiences of sorrow and triumphs. Respondents related their notion of identity to the social construction of their bodies. While some more than others have dealt with their uniqueness quite positively, all respondents refused to see their condition as a disability. They realize the discrimination and negative attitudes of society are regarded more of a disability. Their positive attitude has allowed them to accomplish their goals and triumph over adversity.

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Springer Publishing Company.