# Podcast 4: Supporting an Adult with Sight Loss in the Home Transcript

Voiceover: This podcast is brought to you by the RNIB Older People and Complex Needs team and is one of our ‘Supporting Seniors’ series. It is for people who are supporting an older person or senior and is also useful for seniors themselves. The information in this podcast will also be useful for people living with dementia, stroke survivors and older adults with learning disabilities.

Marion: I’m Marion MacMillan at RNIB. I’m here with Iain Kennedy and June Neill from the Older People and Complex Needs team and today’s topic is things to think about if you’re supporting a person with sight loss in their home. Simple thing that can make things easier for the person – but perhaps aren’t things you’d thought of. Why is this an important subject, June?

June: Well, adapting the house is an important topic. If we begin to think about figures of sight loss, there’s 1 in 5 people over the age of 75 and living with sight loss and this increases to 1 in 2. Sight loss does increase as we get older, it can be part of the natural ageing process or it can be caused by an eye condition or another health condition such as stroke or living with dementia so adapting the home is really important to make the most out of your remaining vision.

Marion: It is isn’t it? So, let’s think about Emily today. Emily’s not long been widowed and she’s moving in to a smaller home with the support of her son Jim and his family. She’s always worn glasses but on one of her recent visits to the optometrist she was diagnosed with a more significant sight loss. Jim wants his Mum to settle well into her new home because she’s been through a lot recently so he wants to know what he could do to help.

June: Well, I think firstly we have to remember, this is going to be Emily’s home so we have to make sure that any changes or adaptations that we make, that Emily’s still going to be proud of, and of the furnishings and of the décor, and that this is a home. And any changes, whether it’s a flat, a sheltered housing or a care home environment has to give out that homely quality.

Iain: I think we’ve got to, kind of, also look at things like changes should only be made to somebody’s environment if they’re necessary for that person. We shouldn’t do a broad, brush stroke change the whole environment just for the sake of it. So, for an individual in a flat, if they’re having difficulty in the kitchen area, then we need to look at that particular area. If they’re having difficulties with handles or switches then you look at that particular area for that person. So, it’s not a change everything just for the sake of it, it’s if they’re having difficulty. One thing to look at is lighting: it’s a really quick and easy thing to look at within an environment. So we always recommend using natural light where possible but then for some people, natural light can cause glare so we need to look at: how do we control natural light? One way of doing that is vertical blinds on the windows but remembering that you’ve got to control the light coming in through the vertical blinds so you’ve got to control that, you’ve got to adjust the vertical blinds throughout the day. It’s not good enough to say: ‘We’ve got vertical blinds up’ – if we don’t adjust them throughout the day it can still cause adverse effects within the environment, it can cause maybe light pools or patterns on the carpet so we’ve got to adjust them throughout the day, it’s really really important.

Also, artificial light. Make sure that the room is well-lit for that person but that the lighting is evenly distributed, there’s not bright patches and then really dark spots. Where possible, if it’s controllable, using dimmer switches and things like that and introducing lampshades and light shades so that there’s no bare bulbs on show so that there’s no really white, bright areas.

Marion: Yeah, it’s quite fashionable at the moment isn’t it to have those bright exposed bulbs and the very bright LED lights, quite harsh, bright light?

June: I think it’s fashionable but it can cause problems with glare and vision. Another thing that’s useful to think about is how you use colour for Emily to sort of navigate her way around the house. We often talk about the use of good colour contrast but again, we want to make sure that we don’t automatically think about black on white or brown on bright red or bright yellow. We can use tonal contrast, so that it’s more subtle but it still highlights the door frames and door handles and changes on walls. We also need to think about patterns and reflective surfaces. Patterns can cause difficulties with visual clutter. It can be difficult to find things within if there’s a big pattern, it can also cause problems with depth perception. People doing big steps on carpets, and reflective surfaces like on tables or worktops, again increasing glare, can really interfere with independence.

Marion: So you really could make quite a difference by just thinking about small and simple changes?

June: Definitely.

Iain: Yeah, absolutely. Some of the simplest stuff is the best – so really simply, avoiding trip hazards by clearing away after yourself; don’t leave things on the floor. Putting a mark or a sticker on glass door frames or, like, the French doors, some people struggle to differentiate them so they’re making them contrast or putting stickers or something like that on the glass to make them differentiate. Also, things that contrast or tactile signage if needed but then you’ve got to be really aware of that it’s potentially somebody’s house so you don’t want big tactile signs because it doesn’t look very homely. It might be appropriate for a service environment, a day service for example but in somebody’s home that might not be as suitable.

Marion: Yeah, so lots of things to consider in that. What about support from elsewhere – can the local authority help?

June: Yup, the local authority can provide assessments, they can come out into your home, have a look around and do a recommendation on any aids and adaptations that would be suitable for the individual and definitely something to investigate.

Marion: How would you access this service?

Iain: You probably want to speak to your local Sensory Impairment team and within that particular team there should be a Rehabilitation Officer. So this Rehabilitation Officer will be able to give you advice over the phone, come out and visit, as June said, maybe do an assessment, an environmental assessment and provide you with some aids or adaptations to increase your independence within the home environment. So your Sensory Impairment team and your Rehabilitation Officer within that team should be your port of call.

June: And just to say, in Scotland we call them Rehab Officers but you might have heard the term ROVI which is used down in England so it’s Rehabilitation Officers for Visual Impairment so again, you can contact them through your local authority.

Marion: Thank you, folks for all that information – some really helpful tips and pointers there. Hopefully some of these will make a difference to help Emily settle into her new home.

Voiceover: If you found this helpful, you can listen to our other podcasts in our ‘Supporting Seniors’ series. We also have other information and support online from our Sight Loss Advice Service at rnib.org.uk/advice. For more information about working with older people who have sight loss, go to the RNIB website at rnib.org.uk and type ‘working with older people’ into the search box at the right-hand side. You can also call the RNIB Helpline on 0303 123 99999. We are the Older People and Complex Needs team at RNIB. For more information about what we do, search for us on the RNIB website.

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