

# Living with Low Vision



*Dr. Larry Lake is a licensed psychotherapist and the CEO of BayView Healthcare, as well as its parent organization, the St. Johns Welfare Federation. Lake says "as a local non-profit healthcare provider, we are excited about how*

*this FORUM can help share the knowledge and expertise of the more than 280 healthcare professionals at BayView and across our continuum of care. In each issue we will address an area of interest to help consumers be even more informed about their health and wellness."*

*This FORUM focuses on living life to the fullest and maintaining quality of life when living with irreversible low vision. Adults who live with low vision have difficulty seeing details, reading, recognizing facial features, seeing terrain changes and obstacles that may be under*

*foot. They may also have difficulty maintaining their independence and completing many of their activities of daily living that most of us take for granted. In this edition, we will lay out the very important role of an occupational therapist in the quality of life for the low vision client.*

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difficulty with night vision.

**Cataracts:** occurs when protein in the eye becomes clumped and results in blurriness and loss of vision.

### How is Low Vision treated?

The following clinicians will be involved in treating the "Low Vision" patient:

- 1) Ophthalmologist – Diagnoses and treats your eye disease.
- 2) Optometrist (certified in Low Vision) – Performs Low Vision exam, determines visual acuity, determines specific magnifications needed for adaptive equipment.
- 3) Occupational Therapist – Evaluates the client's ability to participate in daily activities, teaches client to use adaptive equipment, educates client on home modifications.

### Occupational Therapy Services

Adults with low vision may have difficulty using their remaining vision effectively to complete their activities of daily life. These individuals may experience difficulty in performing personal grooming, meal preparation, financial management, driving and shopping. They report difficulty using knives to cut foods, identifying medications, identifying spoiled foods, dials on stoves and water spilled on floors. Occupational therapy is a profession that specializes in reducing the impact of disabilities and promoting the highest level of independence and quality of life. The American Occupational Therapy Association states "the main focus of occupational therapy is to have people of all ages with low vision or visual impairment participate in

activities that are meaningful and contribute to their quality of life".

If you or someone you know is living with **irreversible** vision loss, you will find the following very helpful to increase one's quality of life.

### What are some causes of Low Vision?

**Macular Degeneration:** (AMD) is a degenerative disease where the part of the eye responsible for sharp, straight-on vision breaks down and causes loss of central vision.

**Diabetic Retinopathy:** occurs when diabetes damages blood vessels in the retina, appearing as spots or blanks in the field of vision.

**Glaucoma:** occurs with damage to the optic nerve causing the edges of the visual field to fade, but could also cause blank areas at the center of the eye. Another first sign of damage is

### WHAT CAN FRIENDS AND FAMILY DO?

- Stay educated about the person's vision ability.
- Help and support a person with low vision in adapting his or her home to keep it safe and functional.
- Help a person with low vision access community resources, including talking books, audio reader services, centers for the blind and support groups.
- Consult your physician about obtaining a referral to occupational therapy.

The National Eye Institute reports that approximately 3.3 million Americans forty (40) years of age and older are living with irreversible low vision or blindness. It is among the top 10 causes of disability in the United States. Dr. M. Scheiman, Professor of Optometry at Pennsylvania College of Optometry, defines low vision as "impaired vision that cannot be corrected by conventional eyeglasses, contact lenses, medicines or surgery". The term "low vision" is used to describe the effects of a wide range of eye diseases including: Macular Degeneration, Diabetic Retinopathy, Glaucoma, and Cataracts. People with low vision may experience one or a combination: loss of central vision, impaired peripheral vision or overall blur.

## Low Vision & the Occupational Therapist:

It is possible for people with low vision to continue to live independent and meaningful lives with the assistance of an occupational therapist. An occupational therapist will **evaluate** a person's environment to assess how it can be modified to maximize a person's remaining vision, promote safety and prevent injury.

One simple and effective technique utilized with low vision clients is in the use of **contrast**. For fall prevention, for example, one could line (with bright colored tape or paint) the edges of steps or foundation changes in order for it to 'pop-out' to the client with low vision. This contrast of color will increase the visibility of potential dangers in the home. Contrast can also be added to items such as clothing (coloring the hooks on undergarments), kitchen appliances (use bright puff paint or raised dots to label dials) and in food preparation (cutting dark-colored foods on light-colored cutting boards and vice versa). There are many simple but effective techniques which occupational therapists will **educate** their clients to use in their home.

Manipulation of **lighting** can also provide increased safety in one's home. The different eye diseases seen in those with low vision can create varying sensitivities to the many different aspects of lighting. Know that there is **NOT** one lighting solution for all individuals with low vision. For safety in the home, two aspects of lighting are to be considered:

the amount of light (brightness) and glare. You should always try to minimize glare. The following are some simple techniques: use a directional light source, have a shade, and have the light directed from the side. It has been found that light coming from behind or above tends to reflect off of the object being viewed and therefore causes glare. To change the brightness of a light source, one only has to change the distance between the viewing object and the light source. As the light source is moved closer to the object being viewed, the intensity of the bulb increases.

### QUICK FIXES

- Use glassware with color and design
- Paint door frames in colors that contrast with the surrounding walls.
- Use clear plastic (with a design) shower curtain rather than opaque prints.
- Spread lighting evenly throughout rooms.
- Clear countertops, floors and steps of clutter.

With Occupational Therapy, lighting in the home is assessed and then the environment is altered to better enhance skill performance. Alterations may include: changing locations for specific tasks, increasing brightness by using different bulbs, changing the distance of the light source, reducing glare, and improving contrast.

Individuals with low vision



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are not only at a higher risk for falls in the home, but many are at an increased risk for depression. Individuals with low vision report feeling unsafe and unable to engage in hobbies and activities they once used to enjoy. They will avoid such activities and will opt to stay home. An occupational therapist can provide the education

and adaptive devices helping on return to activities he/she enjoy. The AOTA advises "Now, persons with low vision can stay in their homes longer with the help of occupational therapists who help them use their remaining vision as efficiently as possible through environment modifications and adaptive devices prescribed by their optometrist or ophthalmologist to complete daily activities." There is help out there. *WJ*

### HELPFUL LINKS

- The American Foundation for the Blind ([www.AFB.org](http://www.AFB.org))
- National Eye Institute ([www.nei.nih.gov/lowvision/default.asp](http://www.nei.nih.gov/lowvision/default.asp))
- Lighthouse International ([www.lighthouse.org](http://www.lighthouse.org))
- American Optometric Association ([www.aoa.org](http://www.aoa.org))



BayView  
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## Health & Wellness Forum

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BayView Healthcare, also known to many as the St. Johns Welfare Federation, is a private not-for-profit comprehensive continuum of healthcare provider founded in 1920. Our superior level of services includes short-term inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation, skilled nursing (Samantha Wilson Care Center), BayView Home Health, and assisted living (Pavilion at BayView and Buckingham Smith) and the Emergency Charitable Assistance Program. Caring Hands - Caring Community is a separate 501(c)3 charitable organization founded in 2004 by our parent organization. It was formed to support the exceptional services and continuum of care provided to people in need of healthcare services and financial assistance.