

# Visually impaired individuals and potential traumatic events: a qualitative study of hazards, reactions and coping

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## AIMS

Little is known about how visually impaired individuals deal with hazards and potential traumatic events.

The aim of the present study was to explore

- what kind of risks and hazards is experienced by visually impaired individuals
- how visual impaired individuals deal with potential threats
- how reactions to traumatic events are manifested and coped with.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Inclusion criteria: 1) visual impairment, 2) experience with a potential traumatic event.
- N=17 (12 women)
- Age range: 20-78 years
- Majority of the participants had less than 10 % vision. Five of them were totally blind.
- Potential traumatic events experienced were traffic accidents, fire, assaults and abuse, drowning, fall accidents, getting lost, serious illness

## METHODS

We conducted two focus group interviews and 13 individual semi structured interviews

The thematic scope of the analysis was how the participants dealt with hazards and potential traumatic events, reactions to such events, and how post-traumatic reactions and fear of future events were coped with.

## RESULTS

Fear of daily accidents was more dominating than fear of disasters. Participants were for example concerned about fall accidents in public space (holes, pavements, stairs), traffic accidents, fire, and assaults. Several participants called for more universal design.

*"... like a barrier at a construction site. If the trail that goes around were illuminated and labeled correctly ... you could have been spared a lot of trouble later on..."*

White cane or other signs of visual impairment were commonly avoided due to fear of negative labeling.

*"I lost my sight when I was 23 ... I would never use a white cane, that's for sure".*

*"... I try to carry a visible cane whenever it makes sense. It is not stigmatizing to me anymore ... Many of us find it difficult to be identified [as impaired]. ... The hardest part is to deal with people when they feel pity for me".*

When referring to unsafe situations, some reported avoidance of help seeking due to shame of not being able to cope, while others highlighted the importance of self-reliance and control.

*"I could walk around for hours rather than ask somebody for help".*

*"...you are so afraid that the same thing will happen again ... some of the worst scenarios, is to make a fool of yourself "*

When experiencing threats of life and security, visual impairment means reduced availability of crucial information. Information in critical situations is requested when possible.

*"I was the last person achieving safety as I did not understand what was happening and where to go."*

*"I didn't know what was going on. I just heard all the screaming. If I could have seen, I would have understood that everything turned out in a good way."*

Some participants reported a need for going back to the site of the event exploring the environment and what had really happened.

*"Understanding the scenario was important. It was however hard to ask for help from someone that could assist me."*

*"After falling at the new shopping center, I had to go back and learn how to improve my mobility. Otherwise I could not go there in the future"*

Posttraumatic reactions included re-experiencing of the traumatic event as visual, hearing, olfactory and bodily sensations.

*"Learning about people being trapped in dangerous situations serves as reminders of situations where I myself could not escape due to blindness. It is like being in the situation once again".*

Posttraumatic avoidance may foster withdrawal and social isolation.

*"We (the participants in one of the focus groups) may not be representative for all visual impaired individuals. We know blind people that are isolated because they are afraid of going outside."*

## CONCLUSION

Daily life as visual impaired includes a diversity of hazards and potential threats. This calls for a higher emphasis on universal design in the public space to ensure safety and predictability in all settings.

In general, visual impression is the key modality in the perception of risk. Lack of vision means need of predictability and adequate information in dangerous situations. Being independent and able to cope and handle potential threatening situations seems important.

Posttraumatic help seeking for visual impaired individuals can be performed in the ordinary mental health care system. However, professionals' knowledge about the need for information and predictability are crucial and should be prioritized. The possibility of social withdrawal and isolation should be addressed.

*«To be visual impaired is no problem - it is just very inconvenient!» (female participant)*

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