

The Blind Dog Guide:
Restoring Normalcy in your Blind Dog's Life and Yours

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Introduction

At first, Cori was almost constantly unconscious. Eating seemed to be the only thing she enjoyed anymore, and it was essentially the only time she was awake. Otherwise, she slept, and slept some more. She hardly got up to go to outside, and even had a few accidents in the beginning. She didn't want to do anything: No shaking paws. No playing with toys. No barking. No chewing on rawhide bones. Nothing. She was utterly depressed, in a deep, dark hole caused by her illness.

Cori is my Golden Retriever mix, and her illness is glaucoma, a painful and degenerative eye disease causing headaches akin to migraine and in her case and many others, blindness. By the time she was diagnosed at age two, she had already lost vision in one eye. The vet explained that it was a condition to which she was genetically predisposed, and eventually, the other eye would be blind too. In a panic to prevent that and ease her pain, she was put on several medications. For a year, she was faithfully given drops and pills and more drops. Unfortunately, almost exactly a year later, she suddenly lost vision in the remaining eye. She was rushed to emergency surgery and had laser surgery performed in hopes of restoring vision to the remaining eye. However, it was not successful and she is now totally blind.

The initial diagnosis in 2004—when I was told she was blind in one eye—was shocking. How did this happen? She is only two years old! How could I not know? Why didn't I do something sooner? Could I have done something more? A few weeks before I learned of her illness, I observed some discharge from one eye. I took her to the vet, where I was told she probably had an infection. She was prescribed antibiotic drops. Upon finishing the drops, her eye did seem to clear up for a while. A week or two later, I noticed one of her eyes looked bulgy, cloudy and red. I had no idea what I was dealing with, but when I called the vet and described these symptoms, I was told I had an emergency on my hands. By the time we got to the vet the next morning, she was diagnosed as blind in her right eye. At what point her vision actually failed is unclear, but my guess is that from the time I noticed the discharge, it was probably slipping away without me knowing.

But for a year after she lost the first eye, she coasted along with no problems maneuvering or managing her life as always. She was just fine with vision in one eye. And then, the inevitable happened. The vet's prediction had become a reality: I remember during one visit over the first year, the vet looked at me sympathetically and said, "You do know she will go blind eventually, right?" I guess I knew, somewhere, on some level, but I hoped the medication would stop it from really happening. Unfortunately, I couldn't pour enough medicine into her to stop the other eye from failing.

The entire experience was painful for everyone. When Cori lost her vision, I felt alone, like nobody understood what was happening but me. After she lost sight in the second eye, she sank into despair. I watched her sleep all day and experience such hopelessness

during her waking hours that I began to wonder if she was happy being alive. I became depressed as well, crying nearly every day. It was terribly saddening and frustrating to see someone I love so much act so lost, distant and miserable. I was the one who was supposed to help Cori and make her feel better, and I felt like I couldn't do anything for her.

Fortunately, that feeling was relatively short lived, as I came to realize that I *could* do something for her. I could teach her how to get around again. I could provide her with extra attention and reassurance. I could pet her and talk to her and tell her everything is going to be okay. With effort and patience, things improved. In time, I learned that blind dogs and their families can be happy, provided all concerned have help adjusting to this new world. During Cori's rehab, I wrote down my experiences. It was comforting to do so, and it allowed me to express my feelings about the situation. I also wanted to remember everything so I could help others.

That's where *The Blind Dog Guide* and blinddogguide.com come in. I want to help you and your blind dog get over the initial hurdles of the overwhelming blindness diagnosis. In the following pages, I outline ten steps you can take to try to restore normalcy and functionality in your dog's life. I also list other notes, including commands you can use to help your dog adapt.

It took time, but thanks to many of these steps, (and LOTS of love!) Cori is happy again. She is playing with toys, taking walks, riding in the car, barking—essentially, being herself again. Seeing her happy and functional again has made *me* happy and functional again, and I want to pass this on to you. As I print out the initial round of copies of *The Blind Dog Guide*, I suspect I am merely scratching the surface of what is to come. I am sure I will find myself adding to this publication as more landmarks and challenges arrive. Yet, there is already so much experienced.

I am assuming that if you are reading this, you are someone who cares about dogs. As such, I probably don't have to tell you that every dog is different. They all have their own personalities and they set their own pace. You may find yourself using some of these steps in your own order, or altering, adding, or skipping steps depending on your dog's progress and personality. You may branch out and come up with some of your own steps or ideas.

The advice within is obviously not medical advice, and I assume that readers have already pursued the medical avenues they and their dog's health care provider see fit. Also, the steps I mention are surely not comprehensive. There are seemingly endless possibilities concerning challenges, re-learning the environment, proud moments, and the like. As you will see, I base *The Blind Dog Guide* on my experiences with Cori. Hopefully, however, it will be applicable to others' situations as well. My goal is that *The Blind Dog Guide*, informal as it is in appearance, will provide comfort, reassurance and inspiration in a time of such uncertainty. I hope it will also be relevant to anyone who cares about dogs and knows how remarkable they are.

Good luck in your path to being a Blind Dog Guide!

Step ONE: Talk with others who have blind dogs.

Talk with other people who live with or know blind dogs. This was one of the biggest consolations for me, especially at first when I felt so lost and alone. If you do a web search on blind dogs, you will likely find many online resources. You may even find some other blind dogs and families in your area. If you have questions, contact me.

Step TWO: Safeguard your environment: Make sure your house and conduct promote the safety of your blind dog.

There are new things to think about now. Will she run into something? Will she fall down the stairs? Will she run into traffic? Much like childproofing, there are steps you can take to help “blind dog proof” your environment. For example, use a leash, especially at first, and probably for a while. A leash is for safety, of course, but your dog will need the guidance and will likely appreciate the safe feeling of being led. If your dog has never been on a leash, this step may be more of a challenge and you may want to introduce your dog to the leash in short intervals. Or just put the leash on your dog and let her get used to it first, before you start walking with it.

Also, the time will come, probably sooner rather than later, when you have to venture out of the house and will not be able to watch your newly blind dog who needs so much supervision. (The need for seemingly constant supervision will decrease in time.) It may be that you have to leave the dog before she knows her way around. If this is the case, confine her to a safe, comfortable area where she will be secure and not get injured. Put her in a room with which she is familiar if possible. Put her bed and a water bowl in the room. (Don't fill the water bowl all the way, and put a towel under it, as she might knock it over.) Have a practice run with this “safe room” while you are home, as that will help familiarize her with it. Introduce your dog to the room, show her around it and teach her that it is a nice, safe place to be.

Additionally, you will have to look for objects that your dog may run into. For example, when she goes out, you will need to ensure there are no sharp branches in her way. Blind dogs no longer have their blink reflex, so they have no protection from dangerous objects. Same thing goes in the house: make sure there are no dangerous obstacles in her way, and if you have stairs in your house, you will need to safeguard the top of the stairs, at least at first, to prevent your dog from falling. In your search for dangerous objects, think like a dog and view the world from your dog's level.

These tasks will get easier in time.

Step THREE: Talk to and act toward your dog as normally as possible.

Your dog needs a sense of normalcy in this time of upset, and if you start acting and talking differently, he will pick up on that and feel even more lost. The calmer and more normal you act, the calmer and more normal your dog will feel. Thus, use the same

tones of voice and words you usually use (save some new guidance commands like "step up" and "step down" which will be mentioned throughout). Also, on the note of normalcy: Your dog is trying to relearn where things are, and soon she will start remembering the spots where things are usually placed. If you have to move something, show your dog it is there by leading her to it and tapping on it or otherwise notifying her of its presence.

Step FOUR: Stimulate her other senses.

Since your dog has lost his sight, he will compensate by using his other senses more. He will rely largely on hearing and smell, along with his other senses, so use that to your (and his) advantage. You probably already do the following, but just intensify it: Touch him and scratch him a lot. Talk to him a lot. Teach him his new verbal commands, about which we will learn more in a few minutes. Give him treats (but don't overfeed him). Get him a squeaky toy. Essentially, help him use his other senses to feel better and become stronger.

Step FIVE: Be willing to bend the rules, but not too much.

At first, your dog may be afraid and unsure of how to resume her normal activities. She may need a little extra convincing. An example of this for Cori was relearning how to go up and down stairs. Since she didn't know what was in front of her and she no longer had "eye-paw coordination" to maneuver the stairs, she was frightened. She mastered the three steps leading out to the back patio within a week or so (with help from "step up" and "step down" commands, covered later) but the flight of twelve steps was another story altogether. I decided the only way to get her upstairs was via a bribe. In her case it was with one of her favorites: fish or cheese. For ten minutes, I stood at the base of the stairs, with a piece of fish in one hand, and Cori on a lead in another, saying, "Come on Cori, step up, step UP!" I could tell she really wanted to, but was scared to death. Eventually, after an exhausting ten minutes, it worked, and she proceeded cautiously, step by step, with me guiding her up. At the top, she received her reward, along with ample praise, and we were both proud! I used this trick for a week or so, until she got used to going up the stairs. She is now weaned off the bribes. Your dog may not even need them. Practice stairs as much as you can—even if your dog does one or two steps, shower praise and remember to say "Step up" and "Step down" with each and every step. When you have completed the stairs, praise again and say, "All done!" so your dog knows she is finished and that you are proud of her. One additional note on stairs: Please remember that once she has come up the stairs, there is a chance of her falling down, especially at first. So put up a gate at the top of the stairs, watch her intently, or bring her right back down, holding her collar or leash. Hopefully, you won't have to do this forever—but you will want to until she no longer runs the risk of falling down the stairs. Right now, she is akin to a toddler in this regard.

Step SIX: Help your dog relearn old habits.

You will find that your dog may seem to have temporarily "forgotten" some of things s/he used to do without hesitation. An example in Cori's case was asking for meals. I remember one day about a week after Cori's surgery, I decided that it was time for her to start asking for food again. She had not been asking since the blindness and surgery. This was partially my doing, as I had been providing her with everything she needed, unsolicited. She simply did not have the zest to ask for anything. Although there was certainly a need for things to be provided to her in some degree—she was recovering, vulnerable and still unfamiliar with her new dark world—I knew she needed challenge and encouragement to get stronger. So one night, I started a waiting game.

“Asking” for food meant coming up to me, wagging her tail and expressing a distinct sort of whiny bark. She usually asked for dinner promptly at 6:15 to 6:30 pm. However, by 6:40 on the first night of this ‘game,’ she said nothing. I waited and waited, and finally lost the contest when I fed her at 7 pm. Each night I played this game, and I waited a little longer some nights, hoping her appetite would get the best of her and she would remember or have the confidence to ask me. About a week later, I decided to start cooking around her dinner time, because I thought if she smelled the food, she would have a culinary epiphany. Eureka! It worked! Granted, it was not her usual authoritative bark that says, "Dinner, now!" but rather it was a softer, more tentative, "Is there something for me too?" bark. As soon as I heard any vocalization from her, I responded with praise: "What? Do you want DINNER? Good girl!" Aha! She did have an epiphany!

Each time she vocalized, I praised. Each night, it got easier, as she re-learned how to ask for dinner. Now, she is back to her authoritative bark again.

The same thing happened with asking to go out. I think at first, Cori didn't know where the door was. After all, she couldn't see it and was frightened to venture out to find it. As mentioned in the introduction, she even had some accidents in the beginning. She did not ask to go out for at least two weeks. One day, she stood in front of the door; she didn't bark, but she just stood there. I jumped on the opportunity by going over to her and saying, "You want to go OUT? Gooood girl!" Lots of praise, lots of encouragement. After a few rounds of this, she had relearned how to ask to go outside. A key to helping your dog relearn old habits is to take cues from him—like when you observe him standing by the door—and use those cues to help your dog progress.

Another example of relearning old habits—and here, it is also an example of simply having fun—is riding in the car. Many dogs love to ride in the car, so you might take her for a ride somewhere. You will have to re-teach her how to get in the car, using “step up” and “step down.” But taking your dog with you car-related ‘adventures’ will likely benefit her tremendously, because she will be out doing something normal and something she probably loves. It will build her confidence to know that she can go out and do fun

things. I remember how happy it made Cori when I brought her in the car with me. This was a welcome change of mood. It helped rebuild her confidence and provided her with the joy that had been missing since her loss of vision.

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An important word of caution on this: Remember, you are her eyes now, so watch out for her safety. For example, help her into the car by using the aforementioned step commands. If you have a high vehicle, bring her in and out from the side door, or lift her in and out of the back rather than letting her try to jump. I have found this to be very important with Cori, because as with all blind dogs, she no longer has depth perception. She cannot see how high she needs to jump to get in or out of the car. It is better to lift your dog up or let her go through the side door, rather than letting her jump and having her hurt herself.

I have one more note here regarding re-learning habits, and I believe this is a central aspect of helping your dog. I mention specific commands throughout this guide, as I believe they are indispensable. Teach and reinforce specific commands that advise your dog what to do. For example, as mentioned throughout, for stairs, use “Step up” and “Step down” with each step. When the steps are completed, use, “All done!” (Plus praise.) In time, you may find yourself using these less often as your dog relearns her way around, however at first she will need all the help she can get. I also use “Easy” if I see her approaching an object. If she is charging toward an object, I use “Halt.”

Helping your dog relearn old habits may seem time-consuming, but it doesn't always have to be. You can, sometimes, incorporate other tasks. And, importantly, time spent will be worth it, because there is a domino effect. With each victory comes joy and confidence. Each time your dog realizes she can succeed, her confidence increases, as does the ease with which she functions.

If you give your dog a chance, s/he will relearn old habits. Things will improve each day.

Step SEVEN: Challenge your dog, slowly but surely.

The possibilities here are endless, but the key is to provide constructive challenges that push your dog forward emotionally, but don't set him up for failure. Challenges can range from going outside, to asking for dinner, to going for a walk, to retrieving toys. Yes, blind dogs can retrieve toys. One challenge I like to give Cori is a game I call “Blind Fetch.” This is where I take a toy and throw it a few feet, and then tell her to go find it. She loves it! She sniffs around inch by inch, sometimes walking right past the toy, but always backtracking and eventually— although usually via a zigzagged path—she finds it. When she does, she is happy and quite proud of herself! This game also works for treats. Throw a cookie a few feet and have her go find it. Or, if you and your dog like to have pretzels together as Cori and I do, throw a few pieces on the floor here and there for your dog, and tell her to go find them. I believe they enjoy the “thrill of the chase” and when they finally do track down their ‘prey,’ it is quite rewarding, for both dog and human.

Of course, make sure there are no objects in her path during these games, lest your dog bump into anything. Again, with each success comes confidence. We don't want to

backtrack with a collision (although some collisions are inevitable). Again, our goal here is to provide small but significant challenges that increase your dog's confidence and independence—that is, as independent as a dog can be.

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Step EIGHT: Praise, Praise, Praise, and Rejoice in Small Victories.

As you may have guessed by now, small but significant challenges, along with lots of love, can help your dog get back to normal or pretty close to it sans sight. I found praise works wonders in building confidence. It is amazing how much progress a dog can make by succeeding at something small but important, and then getting praised for it. With each task at which your dog succeeds, shower praise and let him know you are proud of him.

Also, rejoice and laugh. I will never forget the first time I saw my blind Cori 'watching' me out the window. Whenever I would leave the house, she would always jump up on the couch and watch me leave. For the first month after her blindness, she stopped getting on the couch altogether. I think she was afraid to do much of anything, let alone jump on a couch. However, slowly but surely she started creeping up on it. The first time I saw her resume her 'watching' routine, I was quite amused. She was sitting there, happy as can be, with her face pointing in the wrong direction. Even though she couldn't see, she was still 'watching' me. To me, this was a victory, albeit a bittersweet one: bitter because she could not literally watch me—and hence she was facing the wall rather than the window—but sweet, because she had regained yet another normal habit of "keeping an eye out the window."

Step NINE: Spoil your dog, but not excessively.

This is a close relative to the "Be willing to break the rules, but not too much" advice. Chances are if you are a dog lover, your dog is already spoiled. That's okay, but you need to restore and maintain a sense of normalcy, so try not to go too overboard on the excess spoiling. Your dog needs to know he is still a member of the hierarchical pack, with you as the leader. Regular treats are fine; treats to make him do everyday activities may backfire in the long run. As mentioned previously, I gave Cori extra treats to bribe her up the stairs or do other scary things at first, and you may also find yourself doing that at first, because your dog might be so scared or confused that getting him to move may be close to impossible. Giving treats may be the only way to get your dog to do anything. However, once your dog starts feeling better and is ready for a challenge, give her that challenge.

Step TEN: Be patient, and hold on!

This might take a while. You and your dog need time to relearn all the things that were once familiar but are now strange. You are both working hard to learn how to get around in this new world. But small accomplishments combined with praise will bring victory.

I hope these steps have helped. Now, we move on to additional notes and suggestions.

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Advanced challenges, everyday challenges.

Those who live with blind dogs soon realize that many days, and most days in the beginning, will bring you and your dog new challenges. This can be frustrating at first but extremely rewarding in the long run. Some challenges will be small and some will be landmarks, and some will be in between.

Even though they seem like everyday activities, it may be a while before your dog is ready for the kinds of activities listed below. The following took place anywhere from two weeks or longer, after she lost her vision. Your dog, too, will accept challenges, one by one. And he will, hopefully, thrive as a result. The key is to challenge your dog without setting him up for failure.

Here are a few anecdotal examples—they all made me a proud parent!

Going outside to explore. One of my proudest days, and there are many, was when I brought Cori outside in the fenced yard without having her on her leash. I watched her, and I told her “easy” if I saw her approaching anything dangerous. But her exploring a bit was good for both of us. I stood back like the protective mother I am, letting her get a taste of independence, while all the while monitoring her. An even prouder day was when I let her out, said nothing as she explored outside, and watched her find her way back from the yard to the house. (That was a big one!)

Tackling stairs without having to say step up, step down. Your dog will probably reach a point where you may not have to use the new commands as much as you did at first. For example, two months after her surgery, Cori no longer needed to be told to “step up” and “step down” while on her own steps. She had learned the ropes and remembered where the steps were. She still needs these instructions, however, in strange places. Your dog, too, will learn at her own pace and come to grips with her new environment. Again, it is important to remember that your dog will need supervision at first when it comes to coming down stairs.

Playing with toys. This was a big one for Cori. Before she went blind, she had an assortment of toys: toy bones, rag pull toys, squeaky toys. She used to stick to the non-squeaky toys and ignore the squeaky ones. She would toss her favorite toys around, chase them, and tease me with them, as dogs tend to do. When she went blind, that all vanished for a while. One day, about a month after her blindness, I brought home a soft, squeaky ‘sheep’ toy from the grocery store. Well, it was love at first squeak! She squeaks it and carries it around and wags her tail and has a blast. I believe the sound of the squeak stimulates her other senses and the sound makes her happy.

As a bonus, about six weeks after the blindness / surgery, she picked up and began playing with one of her non-squeaky toys for the first time. This was a major victory, because it meant she was happy enough and feeling normal enough to pick up a toy that didn't even make noise. Call me a doting mother, but the above made me proud. I am sure you will discover many such moments with your dog as well.

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Notes on old and new commands

Below are some commands I started using after Cori's blindness. These were central in helping her relearn things:

“Step up” and “step down” for stairs. Repeat the command with each and every step.

“All done!” for when you are finished with the stairs.

“Easy” for when you see your dog approaching something she shouldn't. Use this to slow your dog down.

“Halt” if it is clear that your dog is about to run into something.

“Here you go” for hand feeding. Use this if you are giving your dog treats or food by hand. The importance of this is as follows: Your dog cannot see the food, therefore, “here you go” lets him know that the item is in front of him and ready to be taken by him. You can also brush the food against her whiskers. Like cats, dogs use their whiskers to feel their surroundings.

You may think of other commands as well. As with any commands or training, be consistent.

Also, continue using your regular commands that your dog knows, for example “sit” or “stay.” She will remember the old ones; we are simply adding new ones here to help her get re-established.

Bullet Points to Remember

- You are now your dog's eyes. You need to inform and warn him of things he cannot see.
- Remember for her what her needs and desires are, because she will need extra support and patience from you, especially at first. Remember to tend to her everyday needs even if she doesn't ask for them (like going out and eating).
- Stimulate your dog's other senses, such as hearing and smell. Your dog will rely on these senses to compensate for the loss of sight.
- Your dog needs encouragement when she succeeds, even at small endeavors.
- You should feel good about yourself when she succeeds, because you were there for her.
- Most days, especially at first, will bring new challenges. In time they will subside.
- Just when you think your dog is totally back to normal, you will be challenged again. You will get through it.

- Practice routines and new challenges. Your dog will improve with each attempt.
- At first, having a blind dog may seem like an impossible task, but in time you and your dog will be rewarded with success and joy, and your bond will be even stronger than before.
- A blind dog's confidence and happiness can be just as high as a sighted dog's, with a little help from you.

Conclusion

Thank you for reading *The Blind Dog Guide*. If you have read this material, it means you are a patient and loving dog guardian and are ready to do what it takes to help heal your dog.

As a blind dog guide myself, I have learned a great deal about overcoming the seemingly endless barricades put up by a blindness diagnosis. But take it from me, you can get through it. With care, concern and a few guidelines, you will get your old dog back, with her original personality. Your dog now sees not with her eyes, but with her ears, nose, and importantly, her spirit! Best of luck to you and your friend!

The Blind Dog Guide is an independent project headed by Sarah Whitman, whose Golden Retriever mix, Cori, was diagnosed with glaucoma at age two, and a year later lost total vision in both eyes. Sarah and Cori have re-adjusted and are happy again, and they want to help other blind dogs and their human guides.

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