



Blindness and Low Vision Support Group: March 18, 2026 Recap

Group Discussion:

The group opened by exploring a core question: where does the fear of falling actually come from? For some, it traces back to a specific fall. For others, it's more general caution that comes with losing vision, or simply the fact that falls are prominent in shared experiences. The conversation made clear that the fear is real, and important to explore.

Depth Perception & Everyday Challenges

A significant portion of the discussion centered on how changes in depth perception affect daily life. Members shared specific situations that have become harder to navigate:

- Uneven surfaces like tree roots, raised curbs, and cracked sidewalks
- Getting in and out of cars (like an Uber), where judging the step down is tricky
- Stairs — particularly knowing whether you're about to step down onto stairs or a downward ramp
- Any unfamiliar or "foreign" environment, where the brain has to work harder because it can't rely on memory or habit

This last point resonated strongly: familiar environments feel safer not just emotionally, but cognitively. In new spaces, members described needing to think much more actively about every movement.

What Members Have Found Helpful

The group shared a range of physical and mental strategies that have helped build confidence:

- Grounding in the present moment — focusing on the sensation of feet on the floor, the feeling of being connected to the ground
- Front-foot-first walking — only lifting the back foot once the front foot is fully and certainly planted
- Counting stairs — a simple technique that helps the brain and body work together, rather than the brain rushing ahead of the body
- Using other senses deliberately — particularly hearing, as a way to orient and navigate when vision is less reliable

- Tactile anchoring — touching walls, railings, or surfaces to get a physical read on the environment
- Seated strengthening exercises — building stability in a low-risk, supported way

Cognitive and Physical energy

Several members described a feeling of the brain "going fast" while the body struggles to keep up. The group discussed how tasks that were once automatic now require real conscious effort. The brain has to work harder to activate the right responses for movement, and there's only so much attention to go around.

This led to a broader insight: deliberately practicing the use of non-visual senses, like focused listening, is a way of preserving and strengthening those pathways over time.

Using a Stick or Cane

Finally, the group had a nuanced conversation about whether to use a cane or white stick. Some highlighted benefits:

- It extends your sense of touch, giving tactile information about what's ahead before your foot gets there
- It reduces cognitive load — when you're more certain about the ground ahead, you free up mental energy for everything else
- It can act as a signal, which can prompt people around you to be more aware and helpful

At the same time, members acknowledged possible stigma. The group landed somewhere practical: the stick is a tool. Its value

depends on the person and the situation, and like any skill, it improves with practice.

Moving onto our Guest Speaker's Presentation:

Our Guest Speaker, Michelle Naito, Physical Therapist talked about posture, mobility, and strength.

Balance has three systems

Michelle explained that balance draws on vision, the somatosensory system (touch, body position, proprioception), and the vestibular system (inner ear). When one of those systems is compromised — like vision — the others have to compensate, which takes more effort.

The fear-of-falling cycle is real and dangerous

Fear leads people to reduce activity, which weakens muscles and worsens balance, which increases the actual risk of falling — which reinforces the fear. Breaking that cycle is one of the most important things the group can do.

Joints matter more than people think

The ankle is especially critical — it's the first line of defense in correcting small sways. The hip matters too, particularly for larger balance corrections. Limitations in either joint directly affect how well the body can respond to instability.

The body has balance strategies it uses automatically

- Ankle strategy — small, slow sways corrected at the ankle
- Hip strategy — larger, faster sways that engage the hips

- Step strategy — taking a step to recover when the sway is too big to correct in place
- Suspensory strategy — lowering the center of mass to increase stability

Exercise is essential and needs real effort

Michelle emphasized that exercises need to be challenging enough to create change: aiming for fatigue by around the 15th rep, at roughly 60% of maximum effort. Strength in the lower limbs declines meaningfully after 75, so keeping up with it matters.

Exercises practiced together

- Calf (gastrocnemius) stretch
- Heel raises
- Hip flexor stretch
- Sit-to-stand / squat
- Seated and standing weight shifts
- Semi-tandem balance

Upcoming April 2026 Meeting Information:

Topic: Peer Discussion: Share and Grow your Blindness and Low Vision Toolbox (Hybrid)

Date: Wednesday, April 15th, 2026

Time: 3:30 PM - 5:00 PM PST

Format: In-person meeting with an optional Zoom link to join virtually

During this meeting, we will also collect short vignettes: these can be a quick story, reflection, or example from your experience. You can share video, audio, or just written text, and you can choose whether to

stay anonymous. These will help inform researchers about the most important challenges in the blind and low vision community.

Click links below to learn more!

Support Group
Website

State of the Science
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