Vision & Dental
Living life to the fullest

Carmel Pine Cone
HEALTH | NUTRITION | WISDOM | FAMILY | LIFE
Losing eyesight can seem like the end of the world —

A group of clients from the Blind & Visually Impaired Center of Monterey County can still enjoy a field trip to Lovers Point and the Monterey Bay Aquarium — they just do it a little differently.

BUT IT DOESN’T HAVE TO BE

By ELAINE HESSER

‘THERE’S NOTHING more I can do.’

Those six words, coming from any sort of doctor, are alarming, to say the least.
They’re also words nearly all of Samantha Kelley’s clients have heard from an eye doctor about their vision loss.
Kelley is a rehabilitation assistant at The Blind & Visually Impaired Center of Monterey County in Pacific Grove. She’s one of the first people new clients — who are frequently referred by their ophthalmologists — meet.
She says the news someone is going blind, or losing most of their sight, is “devastating and terrifying,” and that there’s a real “sense of mourning” about not being able to see.

Indeed, there are several studies showing correlations between vision loss and depression in seniors, as well as a decrease in mental acuity as people stop reading, playing cards and participating in other activities that help keep the mind sharp. Some also isolate themselves from friends and family, which is associated with an increased risk for dementia.

Dr. Reza Iranmanesh, an ophthalmologist with Vantage Eye Care, says those findings don’t surprise him.
“A lot has to do with the patient’s personality, whether they have good coping mechanisms,” he said.
The Blind & Visually Impaired Center is one of the resources he often recommends to his patients. Kelley said that a lot depends on individual personalities and how much work people are willing to do to re-learn how to live their lives.

“There’s a sense of hopelessness at first,” she said. “People say they’ve spent their entire lives as a reader, or a golfer, or a knitter. Their identity is completely wrapped up in it.”

Also, particularly with older clients, “They can be set in their ways and routines, and take longer to come to terms with needing help.”

Iranmanesh and Kelley agree that, for most people, the earlier they

“There’s a sense of hopelessness at first. People say they’ve spent their entire lives as a reader, or a golfer, or a knitter.

Their identity is completely wrapped up in it.”

— Samantha Kelley, rehabilitation assistant at The Blind & Visually Impaired Center of Monterey County
face their vision loss, the better their outcomes will be. For Iranmanesh, that means, “Having your eyes checked regularly, especially if you have macular degeneration or diabetes.” For Kelley, it means people should call her as soon as they know they have a condition that will result in partial or total loss of eyesight.

She’ll do a home visit for clients who are willing, to get a better idea of their lifestyles and environments. “There are a whole variety of things we can do to help someone,” she said.

For avid readers, she recommends a program through the Library of Congress that works a lot like a video rental subscription, only without the fees. First, the person receives a simple device that’s about the size of a box of crackers, with large, colorful buttons that are simple to operate, and a slot for a data cartridge.

Then, users can choose from the Library of Congress’ extensive collection of books on cartridges, which arrive in the mail. The player has a 30-hour battery life (eat your heart out, iPhone users) and has a strap for easy carrying.

That’s just one way clients learn to adapt — and the more, the better, according to Iranmanesh.

“If you can keep your brain active with books on tape and other hobbies you can still pursue, that’s always good,” he said.

People also worry about not being able to drive, so Kelley refers them to MST Rides and ITN Monterey County. The latter is a nonprofit that provides transportation to seniors and people who can no longer see to drive. It’s membership-based and has a scholarship program to help those who can’t afford the full cost of its services.

Kelley could go on for days about the plethora of ways to adapt. Bridge players can use large-print cards. There are little buttons that stick to the smooth front of the microwave, so people can feel the timer and on/off switches when they can no longer read the print on the control panel.

A small sensor on the inside of a coffee mug beeps when the liquid reaches it, so no one has to find out the hard way that the cup is full. Banks can provide large-print checks, and there are currency readers so people know they’re not over-tipping by a factor of 10 or 20.

The center provides individual living skills instruction, so people can re-learn basic cooking or figure out how to keep knitting or sewing, including tackling a task that sometimes stymies people with good vision:

“There’s even a device that can thread a sewing needle,” Kelley said.

And of course, there are apps for smartphones that can help, too. A quick Google search turned up dozens of ways to use the pocket-size computers to make lists, navigate unfamiliar neighborhoods and communicate easily with friends.

There’s something called VizWiz that lets users snap a picture of an unknown object or label and then send the picture to a human volunteer, who can identify whether that’s a lemon or a lime in the bin at the produce stand, or tell the user if they’ve grabbed a Cabernet instead of a Pinot.

Kelly said some people are sensitive about asking for help, and especially about using the familiar white-and-red cane.

“There’s a stigma for some people,” she said, but it’s often overcome by pointing out that the cane isn’t just for the safety of the person who’s using it. It helps keep others around them safe as well.

The understanding that people don’t want to be a burden to others can also help Kelley motivate them. Most important, though, to keeping people independent and active, is for them to face reality early and get to work adapting.

Iranmanesh said if patients “use the resources available to them, I’ve seen just a small amount of help cause depression to decline.”