CREATING **WELLNESS** FOR THE **EYES**

Like other vision improvement teachers, Meir Schneider believes that we have a collective blindness to an important concept – that we can improve the health and function of our eyes. In part one, of a two-part article **Meir Schneider** and **Carol Gallup** report just how much can be achieved.

We have the same kind of learned helplessness about self-care for the eyes that we once had about the body as a whole. Nowadays, many people see a strong connection between lifestyle and health; we feel confident we can get healthier and live longer through body/mind practices like yoga, good nutrition, regular exercise, and meditation.

But we don't make that kind of connection in terms of the eyes. We assume that we may be doomed, by chance or inheritance, to nearsightedness in childhood, farsightedness in middle age, and blindness from diseases of the eye in old age or at some other time, and that there is nothing at all we can do to prevent or overcome any of these problems. 'In my opinion', says Meir Schneider, 'these conditions are a long time in the making, and have everything to do with chronic visual stress and patterns of unbalanced visual behaviours'.

'It's my experience in more than 20 years of teaching vision improvement, that even with diseases of the eyes, we can create better eyesight and healthier eyes. The medical establishment disagrees with me. But increasingly, in many parts of the world, I'm meeting a different kind of eye doctor – holistic or behavioural optometrists who specialise in eye exercises for prevention and vision improvement, and even ophthalmologists who are open to this approach. In fact, some of them have studied with me.'

For Lula Vee, who became a client of Schneider's at his Center for Self-Healing in San Francisco, the discovery that her eyes were unhealthy coincided with a moment of terror: 'I opened a telegram, and it said, "You'll never see your children again."'. Her estranged husband had abducted their three small children and flown them to another country. As she read the telegram, Lula lost her eyesight. 'I was aware of the light shutting off, as if a shade had been drawn,' she said. It turned out that she had sarcoidosis, a serious disease that creates small tumors and inflammation in many systems of the body. It manifested as arthritic symptoms in her fingers, and uveitis, an inflammation of structures within the eye.

Lula Vee, who recovered from serious vision problems, performs a favourite eye exercise – juggling.

After 18 months' effort, Lula regained her children. The problem with her eyes remained serious. Her left eye was stricken with glaucoma, excessive pressure within the eye that is destructive to the optic nerve and often occurs with uveitis; vision soon faded away in that eye, until even light perception was gone. Since childhood, Lula had used glasses for farsightedness and astigmatism in her right eye, and her brain had learned to ignore its messages in favour of her dominant left eye, which had furnished normal vision. A dominance pattern like this is hard to overcome, because it is part of the organisation of the brain and personality.

'When my left eye was going blind, I kept experimenting looking through my right eye in a different way,' she said. 'I noticed how, week to week, it could see more – I could even read with it, which I hadn't been able to do before. I felt awakened to another part of me wanting to express itself. I felt a need to integrate these two selves represented by my two eyes.' Lula was exploring the body-mind link. Using massage therapy, meditation, diet, and vitamins, she stabilised the glaucoma. 'I stopped taking all the medicines, even the drops. The pressure had gone up to 50 [an extremely high intraocular pressure] in my blind eye, and they told me if I didn't take the drops they'd have to remove the eye because I'd have unbearable pain in it, but I had no pain, and the pressure was stable.' Meanwhile, the right eye lost its farsightedness and astigmatism and instead became nearsighted.

Four or five years ago, her vision worsened when cataracts, another complication of uveitis, appeared in both eyes. A cataract is an opacity of the normally-transparent lens, which changes shape to allow the eye to focus for near vision. Doctors told her that the poor health status of her sighted eye made surgery impossible, and warned her to expect a gradual extinction of all functional vision as the cataract matured. 'I didn't want to hear that,' she said. 'I couldn't imagine myself blind. I decided to leave my job [teaching at high school and college] and work in a creative way on myself. I came to California in August 1996 to work with Meir. The fact that he had healed himself of the same conditions that I had inspired me to believe that my "incurable" situation could be reversed.'

Vision improvement teacher Dror Schneider (Meir Schneider's wife) sees strong similarities between Lula's process of recovery and her husband's. At age 17, Meir Schneider overcame congenital blindness caused by a number of serious

conditions, including cataracts and glaucoma, using the eye exercises of the Bates Method, which he learned from another youth. Unsuccessful surgeries in early childhood left behind such an array of scar tissue that the better eye lets in less than 1% light.

For Lula, and for Meir Schneider before her, copious amounts of self-massage of the face, and use of two major eye exercises - *palming*, a visualisation of blackness, and *sunning*, in which the closed eyes are carefully bathed in sunlight - brought the release of chronic tension which sets the stage for improvement. 'The relaxation you get from facial massage, palming, and sunning may at first seem to increase the blurriness of your vision,' Dror Schneider said. 'You're letting go of your short-term solutions for bad vision - frowning and squinting. Even if they momentarily sharpen the image, these strategies worsen your eyesight over time. It can be difficult to accept the increase in fuzziness and continue through this stage. But it's essential. The key to vision improvement is bombarding yourself with relaxation - good eyesight is built on it. Meir spent hours sunning on the roof of our apartment building in Tel Aviv, and palming while listening to pop music - I can't believe he found that music relaxing, but it worked for him.

'Lula had recently trained as a massage therapist, so she was very sensitive to her own body. She learned the palming, sunning, and self-massage easily, and created Self-Healing support groups to practise the eye exercises among friends, and trade massages. But ultimately what worked for her was the beauty of nature, which allowed her to see in a relaxed, accepting way. Every day, she would take a long walk around the lake near her home in Oakland, and enjoy looking for details she hadn't seen before. During her sessions, we'd go to the beach to practise shifting with distance vision, and she loved it.

'In the *shifting* exercise, you look for the smallest details you're able to see - for one person, a small detail in the distance might be a twig, for another, a treetop. In normal vision, the eye easily makes continual small movements from one small detail to another; shifting imitates this kind of softly relaxed, fluid movement. With poor eyesight, you have a rigid, inflexible gaze, as Lula did.

'For Meir, shifting led to his first big breakthrough. Using a sighted person's description of windows, he stood across the street from an apartment building for weeks, visualising them and looking for them where they ought to be; finally, one day, he saw them. For him, the world was one big blur, and in trying to break it up into separate objects, a window was an appropriately small detail to search for. He immediately began looking for the next smallest detail, air conditioners in those windows, and gradually, he built up functional vision. A few years later, he passed his driver's licence test. And he can still show you his old blindness certificate.

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'Lula's distance vision was very poor to begin with - she could read the big E on an eye chart from 20 inches, but 25 inches away, she couldn't see it at all. It was a challenge to avoid walking into telephone poles and parking meters. But she did have the advantage of a visual memory, and Meir didn't. Since it was election time, we worked with campaign posters; gradually, she could see them further and further away. Once she had progressed enough to be able to see buildings across the street, we worked on picking out shapes and comparing colors in them. But it was the natural world that gave her so much joy in shifting that she could really stretch her distance vision. On her nature walks, she would shift with near vision, and then the distance shifting would be more successful - a good strategy.

'Her near vision was never as problematic. When we started, she could read very large print at a distance of three or four inches from her face. With a lot of near-vision shifting, eventually she could read small print in strong sunlight.'

After five months of full-time vision improvement work, Lula's doctors told her that the sighted eye had probably become healthy enough to withstand cataract surgery; the inflammation was gone. She decided to risk it. 'I saw light at the end of the surgery. The next morning, clarity and light returned. Everything came rushing at me, beautiful, spotless - birds, ripples on the water. I'd been living in the dark for 10 years. I'm still so excited when I open my eyes every morning. All day long, things pop out at me I had never seen before.'

The Computer Screen – A Limbo for the Eyes

Within the past five years, eye doctors have begun to keep records of a new kind of vision problem - computer vision syndrome, or CVS. American optometrists reported 15 million cases in 1996, and industry figures show a steady rise of about a million a year. Symptoms include eyestrain, general fatigue, headache, neck and shoulder pain, dry eyes, and difficulties with focusing.

Before the rise in computer use, optometrists tended to start reducing prescriptions in nearsighted patients in their 40s, as their nearsightedness began to be offset by middle-aged farsightedness. (In nearsightedness, the eye is over-focused, and in farsightedness, it is under-focused, so the two refractive errors lie in opposite directions.) Increasingly, nearsighted people who use computers are instead getting more nearsighted in middle age. Holistic optometrist Iole Taddei, who practises in California, explains that chronic eyestrain with near work always brings on nearsightedness or makes it worse.

Like carpal tunnel syndrome, also a widespread problem for computer users, CVS is a repetitive strain syndrome. The muscle that is strained is the ciliary. This small muscle within the eye changes the shape of the lens to focus the eye for near work. The brain tells the ciliary to set up a focus for a given distance, 16 inches, for example. To determine that the page you're reading is exactly 16 inches away from your eyes, your brain analyses the edges and spaces of the letters. Unfortunately, there are no definite edges and spaces on a computer screen. There are only pixels - tiny, fuzzy grey dots. Bereft of essential clues, the brain endlessly searches for a focal length. As you look at your screen, your ciliary muscles are on the move every moment, making tiny changes, looking for a focal point that can never, ever, be found.

This is unhealthy exercise. It's as though you decided to exercise your biceps by quivering them through only an inch or so of their range for hours on end, rather than doing biceps curls through the full range of movement for a few minutes. The strain on your ciliary muscles after hours at the computer is like the strain on your heart after running a marathon.

As the strain spreads outward from your eyes to your forehead, you frown and squint to try to help yourself focus. 'The constant search for a focal length creates unconscious anxiety,' Dr. Taddei said. 'Your eyes are the navigation tool for your whole being, and you literally don't quite know where you are. Meanwhile, your hands get carpal tunnel syndrome and your posture is regrettable.

The whole body tenses up to support an effortful way of looking at the computer sreen.

Taking a break for the palming exercise at the computer; massage enhances the relaxing effects.

Stimulating peripheral vision at the computer.

It's even worse if the job you're working on is difficult, frustrating, or boring.'

If computer work is harmful to the eyes, it is partly because we bring bad visual habits into it, Meir Schneider said. 'People get poor eyesight because of straining to see, and computer work aggravates this habit.

'The whole body tenses up to support our effortful way of seeing, and we wind up with stiff, sore bodies and bad posture. Have you ever noticed the way many of us crane our heads so far forward that it looks like the head can't wait for the body to catch up with it? The head and everything supporting it becomes a platform from which we aim an anxious, searching gaze.'

Looking at a computer screen tends to shrink the visual field. So does wearing glasses; you tend to limit the world to what you see within their frames. In both cases, peripheral vision – everything around what you are looking at – is habitually ignored until much of it is functionally lost. This is true for so many people that it probably contributes to the incidence of traffic accidents. As peripheral vision diminishes, central vision becomes strained and overworked.

In many people, there is a tendency for one eye to dominate the other to some degree; a tendency which can be aggravated by computer work. As a result, one eye is strained from overwork, while the other suffers because the brain is suppressing its input. Many eye exercises that enhance peripheral vision also have the effect of balancing the use of both eyes together.

Schneider suggests breaking up the workday with brief sessions of the eye exercises described below – perhaps a few minutes' exercise for every hour of work. The exercises can be minimal. Waggling the hands beside the ears reduces the strain on central vision by stimulating peripheral vision. Similarly, briefly appreciating a few enjoyable details in the distance (the shifting exercise) while looking out a window is helpful; the eye is at rest with distance vision. Briefly alternating near and distance shifting creates a more flexible, lively gaze and relieves eyestrain. KS

MORE INFORMATION

- In Part Two, we look at several of the vision improvement exercises in detail.
- Guided eye exercises are available, including *Meir Schneider's Miracle Eyesight Method*, a three-hour vision improvement seminar on audiotape published by Sounds True, Boulder, Colorado, USA. Contact The School for Self-Healing, 1718 Taraval St., San Francisco, CA 94116, USA. e-mail: school@self-healing.org
- Meir Schneider will lead workshops and professional training courses in the Meir Schneider Self-Healing Method in the UK in 1999; for further information, contact Maggie Lyons (01225) 722110 or Zeljko Bozic (01225) 723176.

The Long Swing **exercise breaks up the habit of straining to see, stimulates peripheral vision, and balances the use of the two eyes together.**

Sunning **teaches the eye to accept strong light without resisting and creating tension.**

The *Extending The Periphery* exercise usually results in an immediate increase in peripheral vision. Having noticed your limits, you can then extend them.

•*Shifting* This exercise creates fluidity and flexibility in the gaze and refreshes the eye. It imitates anatomically appropriate use of the eye. In normal vision, the macula, a small area at the centre of the retina where daytime, full-colour vision is sharpest, moves effortlessly from one small detail to another; this is shifting. When you're not shifting, you're visually freezing up, or staring, which causes eyesight to deteriorate.

For distance shifting, find a great view. Look as far away as you can, and start moving your attention from one small detail to another. It should feel light and effortless; allow the details to appear. Pick a slightly closer distance and do the same, enjoying the smallest details you can see. Interrupt your scan from time to time to visualise what you have just seen, enjoying the details. Continue until you are scanning very nearby.

For near-vision shifting, use a page where some of the letters are a little too small for you to read easily. You can make up such a page on a computer, using varying size fonts, or on a copying machine, reducing the page size several times, and then cutting and pasting. If you're nearsighted, hold the page far enough away that you are slightly challenged in reading it; if you're farsighted, hold it a bit too close to be entirely comfortable. Start to look at a block of print, one letter at a time. Treat each letter like a foreign object, and let your eyes follow its contours and appreciate the sharpness of the edges and the whiteness of the background. Your brain gets its focusing cues from edges, borders, and spaces – you're giving it an extra nudge. Briefly close your eyes and visualise the letter, but with crisper outlines, blacker ink, and a cleaner background. Open your eyes and see if the image is sharper. It probably will be. Move on to a paragraph that's a size or two smaller, where you can't quite make out the letters. Keep the page where it is, and follow the same procedure. Since you can't quite read the letters, enjoy their strangeness. Try turning the page upside down and looking at the same line. Visualise, and look again. Now go back to the larger text you started with; it will probably be easier to read.

Combine distance and near-vision shifting, to make your gaze more flexible. If possible, precede shifting with palming and sunning. KS

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EXERCISES FOR THE EYES

In this, the second part of our article by **Meir Schneider** and **Carol Gallup** on creating wellness for the eyes, particular eye exercises are introduced for self-help vision improvement.

No matter which eye exercise you're doing, start with relaxed, slow, deep breathing, and continue it throughout the exercise. Blink often. Massage around your eyes. This is a good time to relax your upper body and increase circulation to your eyes by correcting your posture. As you do the exercise, stand up and move around, yawn, stretch, and wiggle your shoulders independently of each other.

Most of us need to make deep-seated changes in our visual habits - for prevention, or for better eyesight. As we get older, it's more of a challenge to maintain the health and function of every system of the body, and it takes more time and attention. Vision improvement is not a set of mechanical exercises, to be performed by rote while our attention is elsewhere. This is body-mind work. The exercises should be used to get deeply in touch with our eyes and discover their changing needs.

Of all the principles of vision improvement, this is paramount - even when the eyes are working hardest, they need to function out of a sense of total, unconditional relaxation.

Vision improvement exercises

As you explore the eye exercises, notice what you feel, and allow your own intuition and invention to awaken. Glasses and contact lenses should be removed.

•*Palming* This supremely important exercise creates the relaxation that amplifies the effects of all the other exercises. It rests the optic nerve and the muscles of the eye and relaxes the nervous system. Darken the room, play soft music if you like and position yourself for maximal comfort, with your elbows well supported - you will need to sit quietly for a while with the palms of your hands covering your eyes.

Warm your hands by rubbing them together and drop your shoulders. Close your eyes. Gently cover them with your cupped hands without pressing on your eyes (the heel of each hand rests on a cheekbone). Breathe deeply and slowly. Now start to imagine ever-deepening blackness.

You may choose to picture a black object on a moving or still black background, a very dark place, or a black world where even your breath is black. You'll see a lot of coloured phenomena until your optic nerve quietens down. Don't try hard; relax and allow yourself to be inventive. You may experience some of the pain you've been shutting out; if you do, stay with it until it clears up.

Regular sessions of 15 to 20 minutes are recommended, along with occasional marathon palming sessions with friends. If you have glaucoma, palming sessions should be no more than five minutes, but can be performed frequently throughout the day.

•*Sunning* Unhealthy eyes find even moderate sunlight painful - we react by reaching for sunglasses. Sunning teaches the eye to accept strong light without resisting and creating tension, and adjusts the eye to different intensities of light. Your eyes set up a narrow window in which they create clear images out of very small differences in light intensity, and then adapt to changes in ambient light; thus, they need the flexibility this exercise supplies.

When you can, perform your sunning sessions at the beach or in a park. Above all, work them into your schedule as often as possible every day.

Lightly close your eyes, raise your face to the sun and move the head from side to side as far as you can in either direction, as if signalling 'no'. To make sure your head is rotating through a full 180 degrees, include your shoulders and upper body in the movement. Now gently massage around your eyes to prevent frowning and squinting - the muscles in the area need to be very relaxed. Sunning should be interspersed with palming, which enhances its effects wonderfully; just turn away from the sun for a moment, rub your hands together and palm.

A few safety rules: No sunning through glass. Avoid the strong sun of midday. The head stays in motion continually, since you are trying to bathe all parts of the retina in sunlight equally and not over-expose any one area. Sunning is done only with the eyes *closed*.

•*Blinking* This exercise bathes and massages the eye, relieves tension around it, breaks up staring. Most people with bad eyesight have lost the ability to blink easily and often; when you see someone wearing thick glasses, you'll notice that they are staring unblinkingly. Blink effortlessly, while breathing deeply and relaxing your upper body, about 300 times. Stop and visualise yourself blinking, then do it again.

•*Extending The Periphery* Since, like most people, you probably have lost some peripheral vision simply because your brain has acquired the habit of ignoring the periphery, this exercise usually results in an immediate increase. Sit down, and have an assistant stand behind you (your assistant can be a child - this is a good family exercise). Look straight ahead while your helper wiggles his or her thumbs just outside your field of vision and then into it, above, below and to the sides. When a hand comes into your field of vision, grab it. As you discover where the borders of your periphery are, you can tease them back with the same exercise. Between attempts, stop for a moment and visualise that you see the thumbs easily and well in a position just beyond where you can see them now.

If you're working without a helper, tape a piece of black construction paper, 2" high by 4" wide between your eyes and, gazing straight ahead, wave your hands on each side of your head, then above and below your face. Use the same piece of paper when you are a passenger in a car. Your brain will begin to find the moving scenery at the sides more interesting than the paper and register more of the periphery.

Take a walk on a beach or in a park without your glasses and notice how much of the world on your left or right exists for you. You may tend to ignore one side. You'll find that not only is it an effort to keep up an awareness of that side, but that you have the slightly weird feeling of fighting with your own brain, which wants to distract your attention and shut down that part of the periphery. As with many eye exercises, you gain a direct experience of how much of your personality is invested in the way you see.

•*The Long Swing* This exercise breaks up the habit of straining to see, stimulates peripheral vision, and balances the use of the two eyes together. For people with low vision, the exercise creates an improved sense of where they are in relationship to objects around them.

Standing with your legs about two feet apart, holding a finger in front of your face about two feet away, begin to sway the upper body to the left and right far enough that the back heel lifts. Keep looking at your finger and let the rest of the world - the periphery - move in the opposite direction.