

Advocates see only benefits from eye exercises

By Robyn E. Bradley, Globe Correspondent, 9/23/2003

Is it really possible to use eye exercises to improve vision? Chandelle Hesselgrave said she's been teaching people how since she overcame her own need for glasses about two years ago.

"When I passed the driver's test without glasses, that's when I got so excited about vision improvement and wanted to share it with people," said Hesselgrave, who said her vision started at 20/440 and, recently, after extensive practice of relaxation and "natural-vision" techniques, reached 20/20. She's now a full-time natural vision educator at Full Spectrum Healing Arts in Maynard.

Dr. William Bates, an American ophthalmologist, developed the concept of natural vision improvement in the early 1900s. Wondering if glasses were crutches and if vision problems could be cured, he began to explore the power of simple eye exercises and the link between stress and poor vision.

He published "Perfect Sight Without Glasses" in 1920, which explained his method for improving vision naturally through exercises and relaxation techniques.

The mainstream medical community criticized his theories then and remains skeptical today.

Individual success stories may make people feel good about a particular treatment, but they don't prove that it works, said Dr. Kathryn A. Colby, an ophthalmologist at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary.

"There's no scientific rationale to support this treatment unless you're in the wrong glasses to begin with," she said. "It probably wouldn't hurt you, but there's no scientific data to suggest that it works. [And] it might hurt your pocketbook if you shell out X hundreds of dollars and it doesn't work."

Natural vision educators agree that it would be good for their work if they could prove its effectiveness through more formal, controlled studies, but, as with many practitioners of alternative therapies, they can't afford them.

"Studies take time, money, and energy. None of us is making tons of money doing this," said Rosemary Gaddum Gordon, a vision educator with Cambridge Health Associates.

Gordon and other natural vision supporters argue that the increasingly popular laser surgery is more expensive than the dozen or so \$75-per-hour sessions usually required to learn the basic natural vision techniques. Plus, surgery doesn't give patients the added benefits of stress reduction, better posture and mental clarity, according to Hesselgrave, who holds two degrees from Lesley University in Cambridge, and spent two additional years in postgraduate study there in vision education.

Natural vision education is not the only field that claims to improve eyesight naturally. A discipline called behavioral optometry also takes a holistic approach to vision problems.

"Neither is based on the medical model. Behavioral optometrists, however, are trained also in medical optometry," said Dr. Antonia Orfield, a behavioral optometrist in Cambridge. "We use lenses as tools rather than as crutches. This is why natural vision educators send us their students for eye exams and reduced prescriptions. The main difference is probably that behavioral optometrists work on a broader range of problems."

Vision educators and behavioral optometrists both say their work is not a substitute for — but a complement to — regular medical care from an ophthalmologist.

The difference, vision educators say, is that they focus on stress as a leading contributor to vision problems while mainstream doctors put less stock in that connection.

Gordon, who was trained as an orthoptist in her native England, said she didn't believe there was a link between vision and stress until 1973, when she first tried the Bates Method.

"The orthoptist's attitude is to push and to try hard," while natural vision emphasized careful attention to breathing and relaxation of the body, said Gordon, who was able to see the 20/20 line on an eye chart after six months of exercises. "My education had said my experience was impossible and yet I couldn't deny it: I was seeing it with my own eyes."

Jeff Katzif of Stow said the technique has worked for him, too. He started wearing glasses for nearsightedness and astigmatism when he was 6 years old, and switched to bifocals a decade ago.

Katzif, 55, began working with Hesselgrave a year ago, and now wears glasses only for driving and watching movies.

As a side benefit, Katzif, who had a brain aneurysm in 1997, improved his balance and now can walk up and down stairs without falling.

He said he was amazed that the work helped him so much with flexibility and balance, and "how all these things related to sight."

Workouts for the eyes

PALMING

This exercise is particularly helpful when your eyes are tired, or before bedtime.

1. Close eyes and cover with the palms of your hands (without touching the eyes). Rest elbows on something, such as a desktop.
2. Relax the mind by finding something for the mind to "rest on." It could be the blackness from the closed eye or imagining a relaxing place.
3. Do this for 10 minutes, 10 breaths, or for as long as you like.

SUNNING

Sunning helps reduce sensitivity to sunlight and other bright lights such as headlights.

1. Sit or stand with eyes closed while facing the sun (don't do this technique if the sun is high in the sky). You may also substitute a 150-watt flood light for the sun.
2. Rotate head or swing body so that the closed eyes are going in and out of the light.
3. Do this for five minutes. The pupil behind the closed lid gently "exercises" by dilating and constricting. When encountering bright light or going into the dark, the pupils will respond faster.

SOURCE: Exercises provided by Rosemary Gaddum Gordon as examples of The Bates Method.