

Freedom From Glasses

By [Wendy Kagan](#)



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Nancy Neff has, for the most part, cured herself of glasses and contact lenses. Severely nearsighted since age five, she never imagined that an existence independent of spectacles was in the realm of possibility. "I was a very anxious, nervous child, and all they knew to do was to give me stronger and stronger glasses," says Neff, who had a prescription of -10 from her teen years until about age 50. "It was always, 'Nancy has bad eyes.' I just didn't want my vision to get any worse." So in 2001, when she heard about Dr. Marc Grossman, a holistic optometrist who specializes in natural vision improvement, she had to learn more. "It was a light-bulb moment when a professional eye doctor told me I could improve my eyesight," she recalls. "I'd always eaten healthy and been active physically, but I just assumed there was nothing I could do about my vision. It was like somebody told me I could fly!" And yet, she did: Neff, a former computer programmer at IBM who lives in Fishkill, was gradually able to reduce her prescription as she followed Grossman's individualized program of vision therapy and eye exercises. Today, she needs glasses only to drive at night.

Hope Is in Sight

Once relegated to the fuzzy background, natural ways to improve vision are coming into sharper focus these days. Among athletes, vision training is the latest way to gain a toehold over the competition. A study of baseball players at the University of California, Riverside, demonstrated that after vision training the players were able to improve their reading of eye charts by 30 percent—and their batting averages shot up too. Another study published in the February issue of *JAMA Ophthalmology* showed that a computer-based vision-training program resulted in a 19 percent improvement in glaucoma patients' peripheral eyesight. For the general public, apps created to enhance vision are beginning to debut. One, called UltimEyes, works by exercising the visual cortex, the part of the brain that processes vision. Despite these examples, the mainstream Western medical establishment continues to insist that the only way to fix eyesight is with glasses or surgery; natural vision improvement isn't even touched on in medical school. "Glasses don't correct anything—what they do is treat the symptoms," says Grossman, who practices with an integrative approach in New Paltz and Somers. "Just because an eye doctor says you can't be helped, it only means *they* can't help you. For almost all eye conditions, there is hope."

The debate is not new; it's been going on since the early 20th century, when Dr. William Bates, the American ophthalmologist who pioneered natural vision improvement, was practicing in New York City. Bates came out with a book called *Better Eyesight without Glasses* (1920)—and he was practically thrown out of lecture halls for saying that common disorders such as myopia (nearsightedness) and presbyopia (farsightedness) could be cured. Why were other doctors so threatened? Bates turned the paradigm on its head when he posited that it isn't the lens inside the eye, but rather the muscles around the eye, that are the main focusing apparatus. The muscles, he said, could be strengthened; he demonstrated by curing his own presbyopia, and he went on to create a program that reduced the rate of myopia in New York City schoolchildren from 6 percent to 1 percent. Yet Bates also made some eyebrow-raising claims that may have diluted his credibility—such as that gazing directly at the sun is good for the eyes. To this day, his work is taken seriously only by a fringe group of alternative eye doctors at home and abroad.

A Healing Retreat to India

One place where Bates's philosophies caught on was India, where a doctor at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry took an interest in the Bates Method. The ashram opened its own center, The School for Perfect Eyesight, in 1968—and it remains one of the premier institutions in the world for vision improvement. "Bates's paradigm makes it possible for us to self-help," says Nirankar S. Agarwal, PhD, who set up a similar vision program at Sri Aurobindo Ashram's Delhi Branch in India's capital city. At weeklong "vision camps" held at both the Pondicherry and New Delhi ashrams, participants come from all over the world to follow the school's program of eye exercises and relaxation techniques. Some of the routines come directly from Bates—such as eye movements that involve looking from side to side and up and down without moving the head, and "palming," a way of covering the eyes with the hands to relax them. Other routines hail from Indian doctors' techniques, such as applying organic honey drops to the eye. The honey creates a burning sensation that lasts several minutes—but Agarwal swears by its effectiveness in treating dry eyes, conjunctivitis, and even early-stage cataracts and glaucoma.

"Many doctors won't go into [natural eye care] because it will reduce their income," says Agarwal, who recently taught a weeklong series of classes in Woodstock under the aegis of the Matagiri Sri Aurobindo Center, Mount Tremper.

"Eyes are a multimillion-dollar industry, from eyeglasses and artificial tears to contact lenses and Lasik surgery." Mainstream medical books say that presbyopia (the "over-40 syndrome") is a sign of aging. "We have countless cases where people have been able to get rid of their glasses," he says. "Many say, 'When I joined the camp I couldn't read the newspaper, and now I can.'" Agarwal himself is 70 and, following routines taught at the School for Perfect Vision, can read without glasses. Yet, perhaps even more than presbyopia, it's myopia that is a modern epidemic—thanks to the rise of smartphones, texting, iPads, and other in-your-face technology. "We have more near work these days—we read more, write more, watch more TV," says Agarwal. Some 90 percent of accountants wear glasses, while only 10 percent of farmers are nearsighted because they look at the horizon. Reams of studies show that function affects structure, but the textbooks continue to say, stubbornly, that myopia is genetic.

An Eye Rx Tailored to You

As practiced at the ashrams and in self-help books, the Bates Method has its followers and has helped many people. "It's great stuff, and I've integrated a lot of it into my own work," says Grossman, with one caveat. "The problem is that it's not individualized." Grossman practices integrative medicine, meaning that he tailors treatment to the specific person—and that he treats not only the symptoms but also the underlying causes behind them. "In the [mainstream] eye doctor world, two people with the same amount of nearsightedness will get the same prescription. In my world, I'm going to treat each of you differently—because the reasons why the nearsightedness occurred are going to be different." After wearing glasses since age eight, Grossman cured his own myopia in his 20s. With his patients, he always asks about the age of onset, which can be telling; myopia often develops in children after a big change in their lives, such as moving to a new town. "All of a sudden their world is totally different, and they become really shy." If he has a patient with glaucoma, which is damage to the optic nerve caused by a buildup of pressure inside the eye, he will ask if the patient has a lot of pressure in his life.

"I don't just stop with the physical. There's a body, mind, and spiritual aspect to all conditions," explains Grossman, who takes a lot of his cues from traditional Chinese medicine and practices acupuncture in addition to optometry. One of his patients developed a cataract in her right eye when her father was dying and she was going through a divorce. "In Chinese medicine, the right eye is associated with the father," says Grossman. "I gave her some nutritional and homeopathic things to do, but it was mostly emotional for her." The cataract cleared up after she was done grieving and her divorce was final. Another patient developed macular degeneration while she was taking care of an aging parent and neglecting herself. "Macular problems are about your retina not being nourished," says Grossman, who prescribed a diet rich in lutein (kale is the best food for the eyes, he notes) and also talked to the patient's therapist. Her eyes improved. In general, the kinds of questions that he asks—What went on in your life before you needed glasses? What did you not want to see in the world at that time?—are not what doctors typically want to know. But for Grossman, they're critical. "Some people somaticize things in their back, or in their gut. I get the people who somaticize things in their eyes."

Relaxing into Better Vision

For Nancy Neff, improving her eyesight was an exercise in letting go. After an initial eye exam, Grossman concluded that there was nothing organically wrong with her eyes; they simply held an enormous amount of tension. "I think that my vision problems started so early because I was a very sensitive, scared kid," says Neff. "My mother was always telling me to go faster, do more—I was in that fight-or-flight state." While Grossman instructed her in eye relaxation techniques, Neff's natural inclination was to struggle and strive, not to relax and let it happen. Yet she made progress, and she was gradually able to reduce her prescription. Then there was a long transition period during which she took her glasses off and put them on again several times during the day. "You want to break the addiction to glasses," she says. "There are lots of things you can do without them—clean your house, or take a walk around the neighborhood." Life without glasses and contacts was at first startling; Neff had to relearn how to see natural depth, which is hard to perceive behind glass. Colors were also more vibrant.

"I learned so much about myself—about the way I see other people and the way I let myself be seen," she says. "My underlying problem was that I was terrified to reach out. I was scared of other people. Seeing in the distance is a kind of reaching out." These days, Neff coaches people in natural vision improvement and other healing practices. "I want to help people know that life can get better. Your vision can get better; if you're stuck, you don't have to stay stuck," she says. "Even if you think, 'It may work for someone else but it will never work for me'—challenge that. What if it could be really easy to improve your eyesight? What if it could be fun? It's something we're born with; little babies know how to do it. Don't make it a chore and a struggle. Make it an adventure."

Dr. Marc Grossman will be teaching "The Yoga of Vision," a weekend workshop, at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in the Berkshires, January 30 to February 1, 2015.

RESOURCES

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Nancy Neff, Dreamersight.com

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