

Seeing is believing: Natural methods can help certain vision problems

By Kate Kirschenheiter
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Many people with functional vision trouble believe that the only course available to them is the usual corrective lens or surgical techniques prescribed by eye-care professionals, but for those who wish to give a natural method a try there are programs out there.

Though not always supported in professional optometry circles, natural vision improvement has been around since the early 1900s when it was introduced by Dr. William Bates — an ophthalmologist at New York University.

It comes to the Columbia County region in the form of a seven-week course taught by Jana Vilner, a molecular biologist who trained in the Netherlands under Thomas Quackenbush, an authority on natural vision improvement.

Vilner, reached for comment Thursday, gave a short, comprehensive history of natural vision improvement, beginning with Bates and the commonly used "Bates Method."

"In this country, most natural vision improvement courses are based on the Bates Method," she explained. "Dr. Bates was an ophthalmologist in New York University in the early 1900s and he did 40 years of research on the eye and how it functions."

According to Vilner, Bates made an interesting discovery

from his years of research. "He found functional vision problems such as farsightedness, nearsightedness, and astigmatism are due to the eyeball being misshapen because different eye muscles are tense."

This leads to the belief that with proper vision methods people can actually reverse problems such as myopia or astigmatism. That is not to say that this method can cure diseases, but some are of the belief that it reduces or reverses the effects of the functional problems.

After a short description of Bates' work, Vilner revealed her teacher's credentials — from teaching professionally for 21 years to having edited and compiled into a book 132 issues of a magazine put out by Bates after he was ousted from NYU and stopped from publishing in the NYU medical journal.

"That was the first time that has ever been done," Vilner said of the compilation and subsequent book. "I think it took him about 11 years to do this."

Vilner said that Quackenbush teaches the Bates Method in a unique format. "He teaches the Bates Method as habits, not eye exercises," she said. "So this means that if someone calls me up and they tell me that they are incredibly busy and they don't have time for eye exercises 20

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minutes a day, I tell them not a problem you just need 24 hours a day to practice."

And she isn't kidding when she says 24 hours. Vilner and Quackenbush's approach is to teach good vision habits to replace those bad habits that lead to the eye troubles.

"If you have time to practice poor vision all day long, why don't you have the time to practice good vision habits all day long?" Vilner asked.

In order to gain a better understanding of what to expect in the seven-week course, Vilner is holding a free lecture at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Acupuncture Healthcare, located at 25 Main St. in Chatham.

What sort of things do participants in the course learn about?

"We work on reading, computer work, TV, driving, going for a walk," Vilner said. "Good vision habits in all of these situations."

For example, Vilner talked a little about what Bates' followers believe can lead to blurry vision. "Someone with blurry vision is staring," she said simply. "They're not moving their whole head and neck. It's incorrect to move just the eyes to what you want to see."

Another factor in blurry vision is that people try to see the whole picture and expect all of it to be

clear. "If you have blurry vision you are staring and trying to see the whole picture at once," she said. "Are we supposed to see the whole picture at once? Yes. Are we supposed to see the whole picture clearly at once? No."

The big question then arises — if this system works, why don't ophthalmologists and optometrists utilize natural vision improvement more?

"In this culture we don't really see the eyes as part of the whole body," Vilner said, weighing in on the question. "In general if we burn our finger we ask how can I help my finger to heal. If we break a bone we ask what can I do to fix this. But in this culture when we have bad eyesight we don't even ask the question."