

Freeing the Neck and Eyes

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Some Background:

Two of the key areas that are involved in so many of our activities are the neck and the eyes. We use vision and the turning of the head to help us to orient. We notice something in our environment with our eyes or with our hearing, we look with our eyes or turn our head to find out what is going on. We depend upon this process being smooth, seamless and coordinated. When this process is thrown off by injury of the neck, by concussion, or from chronic neck and upper back tension and immobility, then our ability to orient in space is impaired. This fuels more tension, neck pain, headaches, and emotional issues such as anxiety and irritability.

When we talk about “paying attention” the emphasis is on vision and on hearing. We use many different words when we talk and think about paying attention. Sometimes we perceive with a sense of closeness or connection to that which we are looking at. Sometimes we perceive with a sense of distance or separation. Sometimes we perceive just a small detail while at other times we are compelled to take in the whole picture. The many shades of language we use reflect that. These qualities are not just mental constructs. They are emotional, and therefore physical as well. That physicality is no more clearly on display than in how we use our neck and our eyes.

It really goes both ways. If we are stuck emotionally, it will reflect in how we use our neck and eyes. If we are stuck in our neck and eyes, it will reflect out emotionally, not just in how you feel within yourself, but also in how others perceive you.

For example, suppose that you had a car accident where you were strongly startled and perhaps quite frightened. That quality of “startle” can get locked into your eyes, in a sense freezing your eyes in that state of gripping. Because of the connection between the neck and the eyes, even if you were not injured in your neck, your neck will tighten up. Stiff eyes means a stiff neck. Or perhaps you spend a lot of time in a narrow focus on a computer screen. Your neck will eventually get quite tight. Coming from the other direction, if you are habitually tight in your neck or you injure your neck, eventually your eyes will lose their fluid mobility as well.

One simple exercise that you can do to get some idea of the connection between the eyes and the neck is to put your fingers flat on the back your upper neck with your palms on the sides of your neck. Leaving your neck in place, look to the left and to the right. You will notice your neck muscles activating to help follow what the eyes are trying to look at. The same process happens with hearing. All of this is somewhat automatic.

What follows are a series of exercises that are designed to help free up the relationship between your head, neck and eyes. The point is to make this movement more smooth and coordinated.

Exercise #1 Turning the Head

Head turned to the right:

Sit in a comfortable position with an upright posture with your shoulders comfortably back and down. Turn your head to the right as far as is comfortable. Don't strain. Keep it gentle please. **Keep your head comfortably in this position.**

Now, look as far as you comfortably can to the right with your eyes. With your eyes looking far to the right, look up and down just with the eyes.

With your head still turned to the right, look to the left with your eyes only. Look up and down just with the eyes.

Head turned to the left:

Turn your head to the left as far as is comfortable. Don't strain. Keep it gentle please. **Keep your head comfortably in this position.**

Now, look as far as you comfortably can to the left with your eyes. With your eyes far to the left, look up and down just with the eyes.

With your head still turned to the left, look to the right as far as you can with your eyes only. Look up and down with the eyes several times.

Several points with this exercise:

- It is easy to overstretch your neck with the help of your eyes. Lighten up if you feel any strain whatsoever.
- Did you notice your neck trying to "help" your eyes when the neck and eyes were going in the same direction?
- Did you notice your neck trying to "fight" your eyes when you were asked to turn your head one way and the eyes the other.
- In both of these situations this is the cervical-ocular reflex at work.

Variations

Once you are comfortable doing the simple up and down movements with your eyes, you might try bringing your eyes back to the side your head is turned toward and then move your eyes in very slow circles while keeping your head turned. Move your eyes in both clockwise and counterclockwise several times in each direction.

Exercise #2 Nodding Your Head Forward and Tipping Your Head Back

In this variation, again, starting in a relaxed, seated position, nod your head down as if to look at the floor and gently hold it there. Look down with your eyes, then move your eyes to the left and right a few times. Keeping your head down, look up with your eyes, then look left and right a few times.

Now tip your head up to look at the ceiling. As best you can, without strain, lift your chest up to help you to look up toward the ceiling. Be careful here as it is easy to strain your neck if your upper back and chest don't participate. Look up with your eyes, then move your eyes left and right a few times. Keeping your head up, look down with your eyes, then look left and right a few times.

Variations

Once you are comfortable doing the simple side to side movements with your eyes, you might try bringing moving your eyes in very slow circles while keeping your head nodded downward or tipped backward. Move your eyes in both clockwise and counterclockwise several times in each direction.

Exercise #3 Tipping and Turning the Head

Head tipped and turned to the right:

Sit in a comfortable position with an upright posture with your shoulders comfortably back and down. First, tip your right ear toward your right shoulder. With the head tipped to the right, turn your head as if to look behind your right shoulder.

With your head now tipped and turned to the right, look down and to the right with your eyes as far as is comfortably possible. Now, look up and down with your eyes.

Keeping your head tipped and turned to the right, look with your eyes up and to the left as far as is comfortable. With your eyes up and to the left, look up and down with your eyes.

Head tipped and turned to the left:

Sit in a comfortable position with an upright posture with your shoulders comfortably back and down. First, tip your left ear toward your left shoulder. With the head tipped to the left, turn your head as if to look behind your left shoulder.

With your head now tipped and turned to the left, look down and to the left with your eyes as far as is comfortably possible. Now, look up and down with your eyes.

Keeping your head tipped and turned to the left, look with your eyes up and to the right as far as is comfortable. With your eyes up and to the right, look up and down with your eyes.

When these movements are more comfortable, try moving your eyes in circles.

Exercise #4 Looking Downward, Swinging and Turning the Head

For this exercise, tip your head down so that your face is facing the floor. With your face still facing the floor, swing the head to the right toward your right shoulder. Then with the face still facing the floor and swinging to the right, turn your head to the right to look behind your right shoulder. With your head held lightly in this position, look with your eyes far to the right, then, just with your eyes look up and down a few times. Next,

keeping your head where it is, gently look with your eyes to the left as far as possible, then look up and down just with your eyes.

In the next step, your head remains tipped down with the right ear toward the right shoulder. Turn your head from this position all the way up and to the left. With your head held gently in this position, look with your eyes far up and to the left, then look with your eyes up and down a few times. Next, keeping your head where it is, look with your eyes down and to the right as far as possible, then look up and down just with your eyes.

This exercise is repeated on the other side.

For this exercise, tip your head down so that your face is facing the floor. With the face still facing the floor, swing the head to the left toward your left shoulder. Then with the face still facing the floor and swinging to the left, turn your head to the left to look behind your left shoulder. With your head held gently in this position, look with your eyes far to the left, then look with your eyes up and down a few times. Next, keeping your head where it is, look with your eyes to the right as far as possible, then look up and down just with your eyes.

In the next step, your head remains tipped with the left ear toward the left shoulder. Turn your head from this position all the way up and to the right. With your head held gently in this position, look with your eyes far up and to the right, then look with your eyes up and down a few times. Next, keeping your head where it is, look with your eyes down and to the left as far as possible, then look up and down just with your eyes.

When these movements are more comfortable, try moving your eyes in circles.

Exercise #5 Tipping the Head Back, Swinging and Turning the Head

For this exercise, tip your head back with the help of lifting your chest so that your face is facing the ceiling. Please be careful here so that you don't over-reach and cause neck pain. Go only as far as is comfortable. With the face still facing the ceiling, tip or swing the head to the right toward your right shoulder. Then with your face still facing the ceiling and swinging to the right, turn your head to the right to look behind your right shoulder. With your head held gently in this position, look with your eyes far to the right, then look with your eyes up and down a few times. Next, keeping your head where it is, look with your eyes to the left as far as possible, then look up and down just with your eyes.

In the next step, your head remains tipped up and tipped to the right. Turn the head from this position all the way up and to the left. With your head held gently in this position, look with your eyes far up and to the left, then look with your eyes up and down a few times. Next, keeping your head where it is, look with your eyes down and to the right as far as possible, then look up and down just with your eyes.

This exercise is then repeated on the other side.

Again, tip your head back with the help of lifting your chest so that your face is facing the ceiling. Again, be gentle on your neck. With the face still facing the ceiling, tip or swing your head to the left toward your left shoulder. Then with your face still facing the

ceiling and swinging to the left, turn your head to the left to look behind your left shoulder. With your head held gently in this position, look with your eyes far to the left, then look with your eyes up and down a few times. Next, keeping your head where it is, look with your eyes to the right as far as possible, then look up and down just with your eyes.

In the next step, your head remains tipped up and tipped to the left. Turn the head from this position all the way up and to the right. With your head held gently in this position, look with your eyes far up and to the right, then look with your eyes up and down a few times. Next, keeping your head where it is, look with your eyes down and to the left as far as possible, then look up and down just with your eyes.

When these movements are more comfortable, try moving your eyes in circles.

Exercise #6 The Basic Exercise from Stanley Rosenberg

The Basic Exercise

This exercise is found in the book, Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve by Stanley Rosenberg. The purpose of this exercise is to reposition the 1st and 2nd cervical vertebrae, helping to improve blood flow to your brain.

While sitting, check how easy it is to rotate your head in each direction.

Lay on your back. Interlace your fingers and put your hands under your head to keep your head stable and stationary. Relax your neck.

Keeping your head stationary and your neck relaxed, look with your eyes only as far as you can to the right. Gently hold the eyes there. In 30-60 seconds, you may notice a sigh, swallow or yawn. Come back to neutral with your eyes for a moment. With your head still stationary, look with your eyes as far as you can to the left. Relax your neck. Again, in 30-60 seconds, you may notice a sigh, swallow or yawn. Bring your eyes back to neutral, then get up and re-evaluate your neck range of motion.

Eyes On A Diagonal Variation On the Basic Exercise

This is a variation on the basic exercise. Keep your neck free through this entire exercise.

Lay on your back. Interlace your fingers and put your hands under your head to keep your head stable and stationary. Relax your neck.

Keeping your head stationary and your neck relaxed, with your eyes, look as far as you can **up and to the right**. Hold this position for 30-60 seconds, then look **down and to the left**. Again, hold for 30-60 seconds.

Come back to neutral with your eyes for a moment.

Relax your neck. With your head still stationary, look with your eyes as far as you can **up and to the left**. Hold this position for 30-60 seconds, then look **down and to the right**. Again, hold for 30-60 seconds.

Re-evaluate your neck range of motion.

Exercise #7 Fixed Gaze

Neck and Eye Differentiation With A Fixed Gaze

For this exercise you will need to have something in front of you that makes a cross shape. A window frame between two windows would be a good example, or some masking tape put on your wall in a cross shape.

Gently orient your gaze on the crossing point- the center of the cross. (Don't stare or grip with your eyes.) With your eyes fixed gently on that spot, turn your head right and left several times.

Nod your head up and down several times, all the while with your gaze fixed on the center of the crossing point.

Next, with your gaze still fixed on the crossing point, move your head on a diagonal up and to the right, then down and to the left. Then do the opposite.

With your gaze on the crossing point, tip your left ear to the left shoulder, then the right ear to the right shoulder several times.

Tip your right ear toward the right shoulder then keep it there. From here, rotate your head to the left and right while keeping your gaze oriented to the cross shape.

Tip your left ear toward the left shoulder then keep it there. From here, rotate your head to the left and right while keeping your gaze oriented to the cross shape.

Exercise #8 Figure-Ground

This exercise comes out of the work of Les Fehmi, Ph.D. He wrote two very interesting books on attention that I would highly recommend. One is called The Open Focus Brain. The other is called Dissolving Pain.

In a nutshell, Dr. Fehmi talks about attention in a way that I find to be very compelling and interesting. On one axis of attention, we can be **narrow focused** or we can be **wide or diffuse focused**. On another axis, we can be **objective**- separate from what we are attending to, or **immersed**, joined with what we are attending to. It follows that we can have a **narrow, objective attention**- the common state for many of us. We can have a **diffuse, objective** awareness. This one reminds me of the so-called 1000 yard stare. We can have a **narrow, immersed** attention where we lose awareness of all but that which we are narrowly immersed in. And, we can have a **diffuse, immersed** attention, which has elements of merging with our entire experience. Beyond that, we can have multiple modes of attention active at any given time. For instance, we can have a narrow objective awareness nestled in a diffuse immersed field.

The idea with all of this is to have a flexible attention, not at all locked into one particular way of attending. This will give maximum freedom to the head, neck and eyes, as well as giving us flexible and responsive attention, meeting what is needed with ease and suppleness.

Working with the narrow focus and diffuse focus axis: For this exercise, find something to pay attention to in your environment. Focus in on the shape, size, color

and other characteristics. Next, focus on the space around the object, letting the object become less important and the periphery more important. Shift back and forth a few times, with the object being more important, then the periphery. Widen your periphery so as to take in more and more. Next, keep a clear awareness of the object while simultaneously being aware of the periphery, that is, have a lightly held narrow focus on the object with a diffuse sense of the space around the object.

Working with a narrow focus on the objective and immersed axis: For this exercise, pick something interesting in your environment to look at. In your imagination, look at the object with the sense that you are clearly *over here* looking at it and the object is *over there*, very separate from you. Next, imagine that the object you are looking at is in a sense a part of you or an extension of you. Imagine merging with it or becoming one with it. Next, toggle back and forth between objective connection and immersed connection. Notice what happens around your eyes and in your chest when you toggle back and forth.

Obviously there are other combinations of awareness that you can work with here. This is a fun exercise to do while walking in nature. For example, look at a tree with a narrow objective sense. You can use language like *observe* or *study* for a softer version of an objective view, or *stare* at the tree- a harder type of narrow. Then try a narrow immersed sense. Here the language can range from softening your focus such that you take in the whole tree, to merging with the tree.

Then try looking toward the same tree with a diffuse sense where you see the tree and the surround simultaneously. Look this way while immersing yourself into the scene. Then stay diffuse, but pull back your connection so that you are objective but diffuse in your awareness. You get the idea.

The Fehmi books contain a lot of information on the use and misuse of the various types of attention. The goal is a flexible attention, and, from my perspective, flexible eyes and a flexible neck.

Exercise Series #9 Salamander Exercises

These exercises are found in the book, [Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve](#).

The point of the salamander exercises is to free up the breathing and make space in the chest cavity to help with breathing and blood circulation. It will also help reduce the head forward posture so commonly found. This will in turn communicate a sense of safety- that there is enough breathing capacity and freedom in the circulation to activate the ventral vagal. A head forward posture seriously compromises blood flow via the vertebral arteries to the brainstem.

Half Salamander

- In this exercise, you are seated. With your eyes turned to the right as far as possible, tip your right ear toward your right shoulder and hold for 30-60 seconds. Bring your head back to neutral, then return your eyes to the midline. Next, with

your eyes turned to the left as far as possible, tip your left ear toward your left shoulder and hold for 30-60 seconds. Bring your head back to neutral, then return your eyes to the midline.

Half Salamander Variation

- Do the same thing as above, but this time turning your eyes to the opposite side.

Full Salamander

- In this exercise you are on your hands and knees. With your eyes turned to the right as far as possible, tip your right ear toward your right shoulder. Continue the bend so as to include your trunk all the way down to the lower back, making your neck and trunk into a “C” shape. Hold for 30-60 seconds. Come back to neutral and do the same thing on the left side.

Exercise #10 Neck Egyptians

This exercise series was inspired by some movements I saw in some old movies where dancers were moving their heads in a very interesting way.

- In this exercise, you are standing in front of a mirror. The idea is to move your head in such a way that your *eyes stay on the same plane*. That is, they stay level. In addition the eyes stay looking in the same direction.
- With your eyes and face staying level and looking forward, move your head straight to the side just a bit. It is an odd movement that requires that your upper neck relaxes on one side and tightens on the other. Do the same movement to the left. Then do a movement where you move your face move straight forward, jutting your chin, then straight back, tucking your chin.
- Once you are comfortable with these simple movements, you can consider keeping your head facing straight ahead, eyes parallel to the floor, and moving your head forward and to the right, then backward toward the left. Then forward and to the left, then backwards and to the right.
- If you really want to get fancy, move your head all the way forward, then move it in a circle one or two times to the right and one or two times to the left. Again, the eyes remain parallel to the floor, pointing straight ahead, neck more or less relaxed. To start, move your head straight forward. From this place with your eyes remaining forward, move your head in an arc so that your right ear is as far to the right as possible. Continue the arc so that your head is back, chin tucked a bit. Continue this arc so that your left ear moves as far to the left as possible. Then complete the arc returning the head to the forward position. Do another repetition to the right. Stop and rest for a moment with the head neutral and the neck relaxed. Again, move the head straight forward. This time arc to the left, completing the circle in that direction.
- And fancier still, turn your head 45 degrees to the right. Do the same set of circular movements with a relaxed neck. Your eyes maintain this direction as you

do the same arc to the right a few times, then the left a few times. Then turn your head to 45 degrees to the left. Repeat the circular movements, again with a relaxed neck.

Exercise Series #11 Freeing the Upper back and Shoulder Area To Free the Neck

Twist and Turn Exercise For the Trapezius

- This exercise is found in the book, Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve
- In this exercise you are seated. Cross your arms in front of you. With your head continually facing forward and your arms down by your abdomen, move your arms from side to side rotating briskly three times in each direction. This will help free the upper trapezius. Do the same movement with the arms crossed at shoulder level for the middle trapezius, and arms up by your head for the lower trapezius.

Shoulders Back and Down

- This variation is done with some small hand weights.
- Pick up the weights and with your arms straight, lift the weights straight behind you. This will naturally squeeze your shoulder blades together. Emphasize the squeeze between the lower part of your shoulder blades, then the middle part, and finally the upper part. Hold the squeeze but keep your neck free, perhaps moving your head left and right just a bit to keep it from locking up.

Sternocleidomastoid Muscle Exercise for a Stiff Neck

- This exercise is found in the book, Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve
- In this exercise, lie on your stomach. Lift your trunk up, resting on your elbows for support. (This is similar to the yoga cobra pose.) Turn your head and eyes and look as far as you can to the right. Relax your neck as you do this. Hold for 30-60 seconds. Come back to the middle. Turn your head and eyes and look as far as you can to the left. Relax your neck as you do this. Hold for 30-60 seconds. Come back to the middle.

Exercise #12 Stretches For Your Eye Muscles

This is a very different type of exercise designed to give a very gentle stretch to the set of muscles around your eyes. Like any other muscle, eye muscles appreciate a little bit of stretching.

First, a caveat. If you have glaucoma or any other eye disease, you can do this exercise, but you must be ever so gentle about it. If you have any doubt about this, please do not do it without supervision. At no time should you feel pain or see stars.

You may be aware of a little bit of ache because of the chronic tension that most of us carry around our eyes. When the directions are clear to you, it will be obvious that you should not have contacts in.

Part 1

In the first step, with your eyes closed, look down as far as you can. Place the pads of your first three fingers on the upper part of your eyeballs. Gently (gently!) stretch your eyes downwards, helping your eyes to go in the direction they are already looking.

Next, look up. Use the first three fingers to gently push the eyes upwards.

Look to the left. Use the edges of your index fingers to help push the eye to the left. Do the same to the right.

Once you have done the primary directions, you can do the diagonals- up and to the right, then down and to the left. Then go up and to the left, and down and to the right. With each diagonal, position your fingers so that you can gently assist the stretch.

Part 2

In this step you are adding an isometric element to help reset you eye muscles.

You do exactly the same movements as described above, but then you add the element of looking “against” your fingers. For example, you look down, then add the downward stretch. Hold that position with your fingers, but then try to look up pushing your eyes gently against your fingers. Continue to hold with your fingers, then look down again, adding a tiny bit more stretch downwards with your fingers. Repeat several times. Do this for all the directions. This exercise seems to reset the resting tension in your eye muscles.

Exercise #13 Changing The Place That You Pay Attention From

This is also a very different type of exercise. Done correctly it has the potential to release quite a lot of tension from around the eyes.

When someone says to “pay attention” most of us will orient with our eyes or ears or both. We typically have a body pattern of what it means to pay attention. Habits of paying attention are often set in place when we are quite young causing us to lose the natural variability in how we might pay attention and the natural experimentation that might afford us more options.

I am going to suggest something that came to me because of my exploration of meditation over the years. From the earliest time when I started to explore meditation in the early 70’s, meditation resulted in a tremendous amount of tension around my eyes. Clearly for me, focus and concentration, and meditation as well involved a great deal of activity around my eyes. It never went very well, resulting in a lot of forehead, neck and eye pain. This did not make meditation very attractive, needless to say.

This started to change with my work with Les Fehmi’s books a few years ago, and more recently with my explorations of a more heart centered meditation.

What I would suggest that you do is to orient with your heart rather than just with your eyes and ears. Drop your center of awareness into your chest such that the heart

becomes the receiver of perceptions. In other words, “look” and “see”, “listen” and “hear” with your heart.

Some simple language that might be useful here is to imagine the space between the space inside your heart and whatever it is that you are attending to. See if this changes the quality of your perception and softens the gripping around your eyes.