



## Eye focusing problems in young people that are believed not to be caused by a medical problem

### Information Sheet for Young People and their Parents

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Eye clinics around the country see lots (and increasing numbers) of young people who are troubled by blurred or double vision, although medical tests show that their eyes are healthy and they don't need glasses. Sometimes the natural focusing mechanisms seem to "get in a muddle" so that people over- or under-focus inappropriately for a task such as reading or the blackboard. Other people appear not to be able to see normally during a typical eye test but more detailed tests prove they have normal vision. This can obviously be very worrying.

This information might help you to understand why and how you or your child might be getting the symptoms they are.

### What is "normal" vision?

Most people, including, perhaps surprisingly, many eye care professionals, have the impression that everyone walks around with crystal clear vision for whatever they are doing; and that blurred vision is always "abnormal". More recent research, including a lot done at the University of Reading <https://research.reading.ac.uk/childrens-vision/> shows us that that is often not the case at all. Many people live their lives with a bit of blurred vision a quite lot of the time. Focusing naturally comes and goes; and a lot of people only focus really accurately when they need to – such as when reading tiny text. The rest of the time they do not bother, so at these times they must actually have blurry vision. Because it *is* so normal, many people never notice it and think nothing of it.

Focusing is generally a lovely automatic system – and in fact it often gets in a muddle the more we think about it, so, for example, instead of relaxing in the distance as it should do, it starts to do too much and causes intermittently blurry distance vision. "Focusing problems" are a lot more common in people who are more sensitive and aware of what is going on in their bodies than others. Some people might find this reflects them being anxious or a worrier more generally.

### How the problem typically works

Symptoms usually get to be troublesome when someone has flagged up the blurred vision as not being normal. This may well be a parent, teacher, or the first health professional you see, such as an optometrist or GP. You may have been sent to optician for an eye check because of problems during school work. Once you "enter the medical system" with an onward referral to the hospital, it might even get worse. What has now become "a problem" takes up more of your attention. It is very common to worry that you might have something seriously wrong, such as a nasty eye disease, or be going blind or mad, or to worry about what would happen if it was to get worse and you couldn't manage something important (called "catastrophising").

As a result of this, very often you or your parents (very understandably) may have started doing various things to try to deal with the blurry vision, such as repeatedly checking or asking about your vision, trying too hard, blinking, staring, asking for reassurance, or “Googling” for answers on the internet. We call these actions ‘safety behaviours’. Although they are designed to try to relieve the problem, they often make things a lot worse and create a vicious cycle! This is because they keep you focused on the problem and can even make you believe that something bad will happen to your vision if you don’t do these things.

### What triggers it?

Some people have repeated short episodes after a specific trigger, such as having to read from the blackboard, or after reading tiny close print. Others may experience blurry vision when they become generally anxious – and may have other signs such as increased heart rate, tight chest, feeling sweaty or sick. And then having blurred vision to worry about, *as well* as all these things, make things even worse! For some young people this might be part of a broader anxiety problem (e.g. excessive worrying or panic attacks). Sometimes there can be clearly identifiable triggers, such as schoolwork or exam stress, friendship issues, pressure to live up to high expectations, bullying, dyslexia, or all sorts of family upsets or worries. Sometimes quite a little worry can start it all off. You and your family may well be able to work out what it might be – so talk about it with anyone you trust so that you can get the support or help you need.

### So what can we all do about it?

- The first thing is that someone needs to have checked that your eyes are normal, and a qualified professional (optometrist, eye doctor or orthoptist) is confident that there is nothing medically wrong.
- It is also really common – people like you are seen in eye clinics every week!
- Often, just being reassured that lots of people experience what you do, but they just don’t think or worry about it, is enough for you to start to get better.
- Try not to think about whether your vision is blurry or not – focusing happens best when it’s automatic. The more you try, the worse it often gets – so go for a walk or do something you enjoy (probably not on a tiny screen though!).
- Professionals very occasionally suggest some very simple eye exercises, eye drops or temporary glasses if we think they would help – but they can sometimes make things worse, so we’d rather not and often don’t!
- It always settles down eventually, but you might need to break habits (or “safety behaviours”) that have become part of your day, and which might actually be making things worse – like thinking about your eyes every time you look at the board or a book; checking how clear it is “just in case”; worrying about “what might happen if it’s bad when I need to do .....” . If you are a parent, try not to keep asking your child how their eyes are.
- Try to reduce, or talk to someone about, anything you know is making you worried or stressed and come up with a plan for ways to deal with the worry.
- We find that it usually helps your symptoms get better quicker if another appointment isn’t looming in the future, so don’t be surprised if you are not offered follow-up appointments. However, you can always be seen again if you feel you need to come back. Try to give it a few months of “getting on with your life” before coming back.
- If you feel that you are experiencing anxiety, stress or depression and this is getting in the way of your life, do seek professional support. Often seeing your GP can be a good starting point. Please visit the AnDY website <https://research.reading.ac.uk/andy/> for how to access professional support or self-help materials that your whole family can use at home.