
15 Minutes to a Sunnier Disposition

Devotees say staring at the sun daily rejuvenates the mind and body - and doesn't cause eye damage

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Most mornings, Ram Jagessar rises with the sun. Then stares at it. And stares. And stares. And stares.

"What you're doing is a slow charge," he said, explaining why he stands barefoot on a patch of dirt in his backyard and fixes his gaze on the molten ball of gas hanging over Lake Ontario. "Your eyes function like the poles in a battery."

It is known as sun gazing, and followers say the practice rejuvenates their bodies, enhances their mental capacity, cures physical ailments and even staves off the desire for food.

That staring at the sun ranks alongside running with scissors and playing with matches in the rulebook of motherly no-nos does not faze these worshippers of the centre of our solar system.

They insist warnings that staring at the sun can cause permanent damage to the eyes are scientifically unfounded and note that, even if there were cause for concern, their practice only advocates gazing when the sun is at its least powerful, at sunrise and sunset.

Mr. Jagessar, 59, a community newspaper editor from suburban Toronto, says staring at the sun for the last three years has helped him manage his diabetes and improve his vision. He has thrown out his sunglasses and says he has a more positive outlook on life.

"I can say safely that I haven't had a down day in three years," Mr. Jagessar said. "To put it simply, I have a sunnier disposition."

Perhaps not surprisingly, most eye specialists view the claims of sun gazers with a heavy dose of skepticism.

"There are no beneficial effects of sun gazing," said Dr. Anthony Cullen, a Canadian optometrist who has studied the effects of ultraviolet radiation on the eye. "Staring at the sun can produce permanent damage to the eyes due to a combination of photochemical and thermal effects on the retina."

Sun gazers say their practice dates back millennia to ancient Greek and native North American civilizations. But its modern incarnation is usually associated with Hira Ratan Manek, a spry 69-year-old retired spice trader from India who claims to have once survived for 411 days on water and energy from the sun.

He recommends novices work their way up to 45 minutes of staring at the rising or setting sun in 10-second daily increments. Once they reach 45 minutes, they only have to recharge periodically with a "maintenance gaze" of no more than 15 minutes.

"The [costs] of treatment for all kinds of ailments are going up," said Mr. Manek, his white, lustrous sideburns hanging like a pair of mittens from his ears. "The sun doesn't cost a thing. This is tax free."

Two dozen people turned out to hear Mr. Manek espouse the virtues of sun gazing one recent evening at a Toronto community centre that marked a stop on a North American speaking tour financed by the pockets of followers.

Mr. Manek does not charge for his speeches but sells instructional DVDs for \$20 and accepts donations of airfare and accommodation, whether at a hotel or on a disciple's sofa.

As for food, he claims to have been fuelling himself with just the sun and small doses of coffee, tea and buttermilk since 1995.

"Science tells us not to look at even the safe sun," he told his audience. "No light is getting to the brain. We are wasting human resources."

He advised the gathering against telling their eye doctors about their sun gazing and suggested to one woman who complained that tall buildings in her area obstruct her view of the sun that she should move if she is serious about sun gazing.

The woman, Amanda Vollmer, 33, a naturopathic medicine intern, said she has no immediate plans to relocate but that her commitment to sun gazing is unwavering.

"When I miss a day I notice a difference," said Ms. Vollmer, who has worked her way up to two minutes. "I get anxious, I have anger outbursts."

Miriam Vainshtein, 20, forked over \$20 for a copy of Mr. Manek's DVD.

"I want to improve my eyesight and have more energy," said Ms. Vainshtein, a university journalism student who wears glasses. "It just makes sense that the sun gives you energy."

Some sun gazers justify their regimen by pointing to the work of William Horatio Bates, an early 20th-century American ophthalmologist who advocated "natural vision improvement" through techniques aimed at relaxing the eye muscles, including staring at the sun.

His theories, however, were controversial at the time and remain so to this day, according to eye-care professionals.

Dr. Ralph Chou, associate professor of optometry at the University of Waterloo, acknowledges that staring at the sun when it is within 15 degrees of the horizon is unlikely to cause permanent eye damage. The most common side effect would be afterimages that could last for several minutes.

At the same time, he said there is no scientific evidence to suggest there are any health benefits to sun gazing at any time of day, and questioned the logic behind risking eye damage for so little proven payoff.

"The problem is there is a fine line between damage and no damage, and people are not very good at estimating 15 degrees above the horizon," Dr. Chou said. "As for the question of therapeutic benefits, I'm not convinced of that. I think they're just convincing themselves that something beneficial is happening."

If there is a downside to staring at the sun, Pierre Dib says he has not seen it. The 48-year-old Toronto dance instructor and father of three completed the full 45-minute regimen over nine months and now recharges from time to time.

"Health-wise you become like a horse," Mr. Dib said. "I can only describe it as ecstasy, and ecstasy is only half of what I feel."

