

The “-6.00” Experience

Doug Hess

The doctor escorts a man into the dimly lit room, and machines that resemble bug eyes are placed in front of his face as tests are done. A chart looms off in the near distance. Distinct features of English letters seem to flow in an orderly way down the illuminated board. A few clicks, a simple 1-2, 3-4 conversation, and like magic, the blur of figures turns from gibberish to beautiful letters. The doctor reaches slowly for a pen and jots down a series of numbers that seem like a secret code. The doctor extends his arm with the paper in hand and explains the diagnosis in what seems like another language. Myopia, the doctor says, just a diagnosis to some, but to the man a life-defining problem.

It's difficult for me to narrate this experience because my situation is so different. My own diagnosis is emmetropia—normal vision. No correction needed, and that means no corrective lenses! Myopia basically means near-sightedness—the person can't see anything far away but clarity is possible close up. A -6.00 lens allows me to get a glimpse into a world where blurriness envelopes one's life, and clear sight is a great gift.

To get a sense of what a person with this level of myopia experiences, I get myself into a comfortable area—my bedroom. I place the lens in front of my eye and begin exploring what feels like an entirely new world. At first, bravado kicks in. With a couple of vastly different squints and rotations to the lens I think to myself, “Hey, this isn't too bad.” But in an instant my opinion changes. My walls change, my door blends itself into the wall. I feel trapped. My computer, my television, mirror, clock, couch, everything becomes a blur. I feel lost in my own life. After a few minutes I begin to calm down. I go from constantly trying to focus and adjust, to slowly gathering and piecing together the situation I am in. My book, although mini-sized now, is legible if I hold it really close, the same with my remote and various other objects. I then stand up, feeling woozy and displaced. I walk up to each object in my room and start to make note of at what point each becomes clear. Close is the only word I can use to describe what I need. I want everything to be close. Nothing feels close enough.

As I've learned from experience, empathy is key to the patient-practitioner relationship. A frame is chosen, lenses are dispensed, sight is comfortable, both parties are happy. Life with glasses becomes routine for the -6.00 OU patient. Wake up, stretch, put glasses on and normality begins for the day.

But this patient is back after an unexpected fall. He stands up, brushes off the tiny debris from his arm and reaches for his frame that lies in three pieces. One lens is shattered. The frame is broken. The gift that was so giving now becomes his enemy. The patient enters the optician's office, broken pieces of frame in hand. His wife is there to console him but his face tells its own story. The prescription

is simple, -6.00 OU and routine to order. I reach in the drawer and find it empty. The shipment of stock lenses hasn't arrived and won't arrive until the morning. My heart drops, the patient has come to me, and I can't help right away. As a professional, I feel the direct approach is the best. I advise the patient to avoid any type of detailed work and to make sure he is in an environment that is familiar to him until his lenses come in. A scary uncertainty is now just a waiting game and he is prepared. A patient who is informed, in my opinion, is more comfortable.

A mother with a young child walks into the store. Puzzled would be the best way to describe her as she looks around while slowly approaching the counter. Her son looks scared and confused. It looks to me as if neither of them had ever stepped foot into an optical store. The mother hands me a prescription and begins to ramble. She describes to me what the doctor told her but all I can comprehend is "told me he can't see far away" and "he'll need them permanently." These words can haunt a mother. She asks how bad the situation is. I tell her glasses have become a cultural normality. Glasses aid in fine-tuning and correcting vision. The child's prescription calls for a -2.00 OU; his case isn't too serious. I explain that he is able to make out objects close to him which could've masked the issue for a while. I also say the doctor was right, permanent glasses would give the child the best quality of life.

Being a professional in the eye-care field means dealing with a variety of issues and complaints. My experience has allowed me to grow and view life at a new level as a person and a professional.

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