

Rest your eyes: Get out from behind your computer



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Since the fall of last year when the world economy started its descent, out of necessity I became a landlord and started fixing up homes to rent out.

Just this last weekend I was taping and getting ready to paint the inside of a house here in Brenham when I realized something. I was actually enjoying the manual labor because I was earning while not having to look at a computer screen.

After 28 years I have been staring into computer monitors at an ever increasing rate. In the 1980s it was a monochrome CRT I had to share with dozens of other operators and programmers. The 1990s brought laptops home and now I had computer screens to stare at both at home and work.

As the 21st century started, in my hand was a smart phone with yet another screen to glare at but this one was even smaller.

Now I toggle between an iPhone touch screen, laptop at home, big screen LCD TV at home, work laptop for client site testing, numerous client computer screens all day long, and occasionally the LCD touch screen on my TomTom-GO GPS. The vast majority of my waking hours are spent getting input from

one of numerous LCD screens in my little world.

Turns out I'm not alone since the Council on Research Excellence published a report this year showing baby boomers aged 45-54 are the biggest consumers of digital media which makes them spend an average of 9 1/2 hours per day gazing at their Blackberries, televisions, computers and

other video-capable devices.

That is more than the kids because at least they spend some time at school listening to a human talk in class or have to read something call a "book." We middle-aged yahoos, especially guys, are constantly glaring at LCD monitors of some starting from sunrise to lights out.

I guess that is why I am actually enjoying changing locks, repairing sheet rock and fixing up homes for my tenants to live in and enjoy. I have massively decreased my screen time on the weekends and I actually have something to show for it.

My clients and I stare at computer screens of different sizes all day long. Some of my customers even have two computer monitors on their desk. My CAD (computer aided design) clients have large 22-inch LCD screens side by side taking up almost the complete

width of their desk.

They have to turn their head to take in all that digital input but they are quite productive.

They get in their cars and start pecking at their touch screen LCD monitor to tune the radio, turn on the A/C, or run the navigation system. While they are driving calls are made, text messages are sent, and e-mail is even answered using the small LCD screens on their iPhones and Blackberries.

Five years ago I had a bad case of carpal tunnel syndrome on my right wrist from two decades of pushing a mouse and typing on computer keyboards for lunch money.

Luckily Dr. Thai cured me of that in five minutes with a few pulls of my fingers and pops of my knuckles. That miracle worker kept me from having to get cut and saved me thousands not to mention my wrist as been pain-free ever since.

This made me worry that my eyes were going to wear out and give me trouble like my wrist did. For the past couple of years I have had to wear reading glasses to read my right wing books from conservative authors like Glenn Beck, Shawn Hannity and Ann Coulter. Not prescription glasses mind you, but just the cheap \$5 reading specs from Wal-Mart.

From what I have researched, the

good news is that being in front of computer screens all day long does not damage your eyes. It however may cause eye strain if lighting, angle of viewing, distance or font size is not conducive to the reader.

This type of eye strain due to improper or excessive viewing of computer is called Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS) which can cause headaches, fatigue, dry eyes and focusing difficulties. I definitely have CVS and this is what puts me out at night when I experience these symptoms around 11 p.m.

There are some things we call all do to decrease our vulnerability to CVS by first getting an eye exam. If you are having problems focusing or getting headaches then you may want to have your eyes checked by a professional.

My son had a tracking problem twelve years ago which hurt his reading development in the early years. After we got that fixed he was able to read better and focus longer.

If your screen looks blurry, odds are it is not the screen but your own eyeballs that need tweaking. No larger screen or bigger font will help true eye problems so get that verified up front.

After you have made sure you eyes are good or at least you are looking through the proper corrective lenses, then work on better visual ergonomics. This means

configuring your computer workstation with the right monitor height and angle so you are look directly into the top portion of the screen.

You want that screen at just the right distance from your eyes which should be somewhere between 20-26 inches. You do not want it too far away or way up close and you should not have to tilt, turn, or raise your head to see it either. The center of the screen should be 4 to 9 inches below your eyes enabling you to slightly look down to it. Both your arms and thighs should be level and your straight on view should be right at the top portion of the monitor.

Verify the LCD has enough brightness turned up and stick with the standard screen resolution of 1024x768 so the fonts will not be too small. Also, try to take a 5-10 minutes break every hour so you do not tire your eyes out over a continuous multi-hour session.

Bottom line: If you're a tech head like me, give those old eyes a rest and decrease your screen time by enjoying the old analog world.

Next week's column: Hard drive partitioning.

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