Hadley

Choosing and Using a Magnifier

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss choosing and using a magnifier for everyday tasks, and our guest is Hadley's Chief Program Officer, Ed Haines. Welcome to the show, Ed.

**Ed Haines:** Thank you, Ricky.

**Ricky Enger:** So good to have you here. Actually, I think it turns out that you have a background that's really well-suited to come talk about magnifiers. So why don't you just give us a quick intro, tell us a bit about yourself and how that background has led to you being able to talk about this today.

**Ed Haines:** Sure, thanks. Yes, I'm Hadley's Chief Program Officer, but I've also been a vision rehabilitation therapist for a lot of years, so I've spent a lot of time helping people one-on-one choose and use magnifiers.

**Ricky Enger:** So, you've had that personal experience with introducing people to magnifiers and kind of helping them figure out where they fit in the tasks that they do every day. So that's perfect for what we happen to be talking about. I know that a magnifier is a pretty common concept. People are familiar with what magnifiers do, and it's one of the first things that people think about when they start losing their vision. They can't see things as well as they used to. What are some of those tasks that people usually initially gravitate towards when they're thinking about using a magnifier?

**Ed Haines:** Right. Well, and we're talking of course about right now, about optical magnifiers.

**Ricky Enger:** Right. So that standard handheld lens. Yeah.

**Ed Haines:** The kind you buy in the drugstore initially, and we're all familiar with those. We've used them for crafts perhaps, or everyone has a magnifier sitting around the house. So, it's normal to want to look at those as possible solutions if vision is decreasing and it's a little harder to do certain tasks. And you're right, there's usually one task that people use magnifiers for right out of the gate, and that is reading print.

**Ricky Enger:** When people are reading print, there's kind of a lot that goes into that. Maybe they're thinking of reading their bottle of medication or looking at the directions for how to cook things, or sometimes they even want to read a newspaper or a book or whatever. But sometimes this handheld magnifier just really isn't the right tool for the job. For example, if you're trying to read something from across the room on a restaurant board, an optical magnifier, this thing that you hold in your hand is not going to be the right tool for that. What are some tasks that people still want to do that are not best suited for this handheld thing, and then in that case, what do they use?

**Ed Haines:** Well, it's a good question and maybe before I answer that it's probably important for me to talk about a couple characteristics of optical magnifiers. It's kind of paradoxical that the first thing is that the more powerful the lens is, the smaller it is. So, the more you magnify something, the smaller your field of view. So, a low power magnifier, for instance, may be able to magnify a whole page of a book, but a higher power magnifier is going to be able to only magnify or enlarge say a sentence or maybe even a few words or letters.

And then the other thing is the more powerful the lens is usually the closer you have to hold it to your eye. There are a lot of times when magnifiers are perfectly appropriate for reading tasks and even reading the newspaper or small print. But if you start to need something a bit more powerful, the characteristics of magnification, optical magnification, it's going to be a little harder to use those. It's not going to be the same experience as you had when you weren't using a magnifier. So that's when it's time to switch. And there are other types of magnification besides lenses or optical magnification. There are lots of electronic magnifiers out there, and they range in every size from desktop to handheld, your phone, usually your mobile devices, your Android phones or your iPhones have magnifying features or apps on them. So, there are lots of other options that you can use if the lenses are no longer doing the job,

**Ricky Enger:** Which is good because I'm just thinking about how tiring this would be to have this handheld magnifier, this lens that you're reading a couple of words at a time, and then you got to move it, and then you got to make sure it's positioned properly and so on. It's great that there are options that can make this a little bit easier. I do think though, that what's that saying where if you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. I think for people who end up finding a magnifier and they're super excited about it and suddenly they want to use it for every task, but some of those things just are not well suited for using a magnifier. Are there's some tasks like that where maybe there's a better way to do it than to use one of these magnifiers?

**Ed Haines:** Sure, absolutely. And just to step back a little bit, when we look at any tasks that we're trying to see or use our vision to accomplish, we always need to consider what's the simplest solution? Sometimes magnifiers seem like they're a simple solution, but I'll give you a good example, watching the TV. There are lots of sorts of spectacle mounted telescopes out there that will magnify what you see on the TV and make it easier to see all the details. But an equally valid solution might be to just pull your chair up closer to the television.

And that's the simplest, that's the least amount of effort, and it does the job in the same way. Same with let's say computer screens. Now I've seen people put large magnifying screens in front of their computer screen, or I've seen them even hold a magnifier in front of their screen to try to see what the cursor's doing or what the email is saying, when the font size is unreadable without it. But most computers, all computers probably have built-in features within their operating system that can make the appearance of the screen, the size of the font, the size of the cursor, etcetera, much, much easier to see with your current vision. So, magnification may not be the simplest solution in that instance. It's always good to go back when you're looking to grab a magnifier to do a job, just ask yourself, is this the simplest way I can solve this problem?

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, that makes total sense. I think it's human nature for people to just gravitate toward what they know. And if this is the tool that works for this task, then why not here? So yeah, it's great to know that there are multiple ways of doing things, whether it's using a built-in tool on a computer, or even in some cases using a non-visual way of doing things. Like if you're talking about, I don't know, reading longer text, and your eyes are really getting tired, but you're still like, well, I have to read. So, investigating some of those non-visual ways like audiobooks and such to do that sort of task.

**Ed Haines:** Sure. Find the simplest solution.

**Ricky Enger:** Exactly. Are there things that people typically don't know or don't consider when they're thinking about magnifiers or magnification?

**Ed Haines:** Yes, there are. And it's natural to want to find one device, one magnifier that works for everything. It's just normal. You're hoping you can find something that'll solve all your problems, but most people who use magnifiers find that they really need several different kinds. It's kind of like having a toolbox. You don't just have one tool in there. You have a tool for every specific job that you want to accomplish. So, you may have a bunch of different magnifiers that work in different situations. You might have one for reading the paper versus a pill bottle, one in the kitchen for reading labels and recipes. You'll need one that maybe fits in your pocket or your purse because you're going to go use it at the store or church. You might have one that's mounted on a stand that you're using for crafts. There are a whole bunch of magnification options out there, and you may need three or four or five just depending on all the different jobs you want them to do.

**Ricky Enger:** Well, I always wonder about this because there are so many different magnifiers out there, but I don't often hear, okay, there's a user manual that comes with this or whatever. Are they intuitive to use? Is there a specific technique that people should know about using magnifiers?

**Ed Haines:** It's funny. They're kind of intuitive because we've all had a magnifier around the house, and we've all seen it being used. But when we use them over long periods of time, particularly if you're going to be reading a book or reading a newspaper for any length of time, yeah, there's some specific things you need to do to make sure you're using them correctly and you're getting the most out of them.

The first thing is that everything has to be in a straight line. You have to be able to have a straight line between your eye and the lens and what it is you want to see. If you have a newspaper, say flat on the table, what does that mean? It means you have to really lean way over. That's not really comfortable, at least for the long term. I mean, if you're going to sit down and have an hour with the newspaper, having it flat on the table isn't going to work.

You have to have it held up. So now you're holding up the paper, you're holding up the lens, and everything's in a straight line between your eye and the thing you want to magnify. That gets pretty tiring. So, it's not always easy to use magnifiers for long-term reading.

And then second, you really need to experiment to find the best distance between your eye and the lens. Remember I talked about how the more powerful the lens is, the closer you have to have it to your eye? So essentially people need to start out by putting the lens on whatever it is they want to read, and then slowly bringing it toward their eye until it's right in focus and it's where they need it to be. Again, the physical demands of using magnifiers in this way can be tiring. And if your hands start to shake or something like that, then that makes it even more difficult.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, that totally makes sense. And I guess that's one reason why there are things like the desktop magnifiers where you can put something under it and then read it that way or whatever. We've kind of touched on a lot of these different magnifier types, and we've talked about that you might actually need more than one of them, but where do people even go to just get that experience of getting their hands on something and figuring out what it is they actually need? I know a lot of people may have this drawer full of magnifiers that they've bought thinking it would work, or people have bought for them, and they just don't have the right thing. So where can people go to just get more information about this and try them out?

**Ed Haines:** Yeah, you're right, Ricky. It can be overwhelming. There are so many options, and even when you look at electronic magnification, there are just tons of them out there, all different permutations with lots of different features. Even though they essentially all have the same two parts, which is a camera and the screen, whatever it is, the camera takes a picture of something, and the screen blows it up. But you're right, there's desktop models which are really super easy and comfortable to use. There’re handheld models and then there's the whole range of optical devices, which can include telescopes, spectacle mounted telescopes, and then handheld lenses, et cetera.

So, there's a lot. I always advise folks when they're thinking about really seriously using magnification, consult with a professional in the field. The primary choice would be a low vision specialist. That's an optometrist who specializes in maximizing your remaining vision. And not only will you get evaluated for magnification, but you'll also get some really important tests that will tell you about your color vision, your glare sensitivity, and a lot of other stuff. So, a session with a low vision specialist is really recommended. There are also other professionals like certified low vision therapists, occupational therapists, or vision rehabilitation therapists. All of them have experience with magnification and can kind of help guide you to make some appropriate choices and also help train you in how to use them.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, because that's important. It's one thing to have the tool and it's another to actually know how to use it in your everyday environment. By the way, if you are thinking, well, where am I going to find one of those low vision therapists or what have you, you can give us a call at Hadley, and we can help you find someone local to you if you're not able to do that.

So, let's say then that you get the magnifier, it's working great, and you have this nice workflow, and then your vision changes and the magnifier's just not working the way it used to. And now what do you do? Because you spent all this time learning how it works and it's just not working anymore. So, do you just go get a stronger one or what are the options?

**Ed Haines:** Yeah, you might. A stronger one might be appropriate, but I would urge folks to again step back and think about the job you want that magnifier to help with, and then ask yourself or ask a professional if there's any alternative you should consider. As I mentioned, stronger doesn't necessarily mean better considering the limitation of lenses. I definitely would try to consult with a professional. Here's a good example. If reading with magnification becomes really tough and a stronger one is just more difficult to use, there might be a simpler solution. It might be time, as I think you mentioned before, just turning to audiobooks. It's a lot less effort and it gives you a different but just as meaningful experience for reading. So, a professional can help guide you through those choices. And so, before you just go out and grab a stronger model, think about the job, ask for some help, and our experts at Hadley to help you with these choices as well. So, I really urge you to call them.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, absolutely. We're always happy to talk about this kind of thing and just give that experience of here's some things that may work great with a stronger magnifier, and then here are some alternative techniques to try instead. We do also, by the way, have some workshops on that configuration for your computer or your phone to make things easier to see and some workshops on all these different types of magnifiers, what they look like, things like that. So, you can check that out as well. We'll have that information in the show notes. Ed, do you have any final advice that you would give to somebody who's thinking about using magnification?

**Ed Haines:** Sure. And you just mentioned it, but it's worth saying again. We have some workshops on the different types of magnifiers. It's a great place to start and just get a sense of your general knowledge about different types of magnifiers and what they're used for and how they're used. So, it's a great place to start. And then if you've decided you want to try magnifiers, unfortunately, most of them are not usually covered by Medicare or insurance, and they can be costly.

It just depends on what you're choosing. I really urge folks, if at all possible, if you're thinking about purchasing a magnifier, try it out on the job that you want it to do in the setting where you want to do the job at.

**Ricky Enger:** Makes sense.

**Ed Haines:** Yeah. I mean, sometimes trying something in a clinic or an office is really different than trying it in your home environment with the lighting you have in your home and just the general environment and the physical setting where you have to hold it. So, before you purchase one, if it's possible, try it out at home doing the job you want it to do, and then you'll be fairly secure that it's going to work for you.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. And a lot of people may not have even thought that was a possibility to ask, hey, can I try this at home? Is it possible to get a loaner device for a little bit? Or that a low vision therapists or rehabilitation therapists would come to people's houses and show them the different types of magnifiers. So that is a thing that people can do, right?

**Ed Haines:** It is, absolutely. I had a whole kit that was really large, and I would bring it to someone's house, and we'd talk about the different things that they wanted magnification to do for them, and then we would try out all sorts of different magnifiers to see which one worked best for them. So yeah, it takes some experimentation. It's not a one size fits all, and it's not going to be a quick process, but if you can find a magnifier that works for you for a specific job, they can really be helpful.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for that, just for stopping by and sharing your expertise. I really think this is a kind of a deceptively simple topic. You think you know everything about magnifiers, and then it turns out there are so many options. So, if you're hoping to learn more, our show notes are a great place to start with that. We'll have links to information on those different types of magnifiers. We'll have links to workshops on setting up your phone and your computer to use those built-in features to make those things easier to see. If you'd like to learn a bit more about low vision specialists and what they do, we've got a link for that as well. Sometimes the best course of action is just to pick up the phone and chat with a human, and we're happy to do that with you. So, give us a call 800-323-4238, and we'll be happy to walk you through just some of that decision making process. Ed, thank you again so much for stopping by. Thanks for the conversation, for sharing your expertise with us. I think it's really helpful.

**Ed Haines:** It's a pleasure, Ricky. Thank you.

**Ricky Enger:** Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's podcast@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.