

from "Transforming Leadership"

CHAPTER 13

Achieving and Maintaining Personal Peak Performance

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One is limited when one is conscious of limitation
Harriet Jayne Kline

One who wants to become that which one is supposed to be must leave that which one is now
Melbert Eckhart

Sweeping social, economic, and ecological factors are increasingly interacting with each other around the world, pressuring organizations to make fundamental changes in how they relate to both their employees and their environments. These fundamental changes in organizational outlook and organizational behavior are entering management thinking with the title of *Organizational Transformation* (OT). Just as organizational development (OD) has evolved to help organizations develop toward their potentials, OT is evolving today to help these same organizations undergo needed fundamental changes in their very natures.

The transformation of an organization's fundamental purpose and outlook requires that its individual members must also undergo some very basic changes (or personal transformations). Indeed, it could be argued that a "critical mass" of individual members need to undergo personal transformations before their organizations can undergo system-wide transformation. Organizational systems, through their formal practices and procedures, and through their informal norms and myths, steadfastly attempt to maintain the status quo. To alter that status quo, it is necessary for individuals to perceive and act in new, perhaps unfamiliar, ways.

With increasing turbulence, transience, and complexity in our society, both organizational and individual excellence will be at a premium. *High-Performing Systems* as described by Vail (1982) will be at an advantage. These High-Performing Systems will need to attract and keep members who are able to evolve and maintain their own *Personal Peak Performance* (PPP).

The focus of this chapter is on PPP and on two of the factors which I view as critical for achieving and maintaining PPP: individual belief systems and whole-person wellness. The chapter will be of interest to anyone who is experiencing the transformative pressures mentioned above. It also should be of special interest to would-be facilitators of OT, for whom personal transformation is a prerequisite

to serving as a key resource to organizations and organizational members experiencing transformations. For these practitioners, the chapter provides both guidelines for their own personal work and suggestions for working with others.

THE REALM OF ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The dynamics of achieving and maintaining PPP can be embedded in an overall framework for Organizational Transformation. As can be seen in Figure 1, this view of OT emphasizes interactions among the organization and its purpose, the organization's external environment, and the individuals who populate the organization. Each of these domains—organization (system), environment (suprasystem), and individual (subsystem)—both influence and are influenced by the other two.

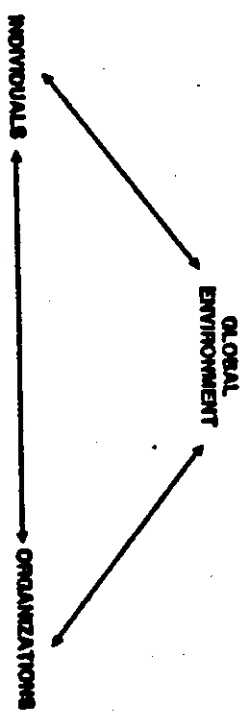


Figure 1. The realm of Organizational Transformation

Figure 2 adds more detail to Figure 1, providing a performance focus to the interaction. The environment provides an overall performance ethos which, at least in the United States, encourages people to do their best and rewards organizations for superior productivity. This performance ethos has arisen from a variety of myths about the moral virtues of hard work and persistence. Similarly, the prevailing "world view" suggests that performance will reach its peak if people will use the scientific method and logical analysis to understand situations and solve problems. Many argue that this world view is giving way to a more systems-oriented, holistic approach to understanding and problem solving—reductionistic to expansionistic; analysis to synthesis; deterministic to teleologic (Actorff, 1981; Capra, 1982; Ferguson, 1980; Naisbitt, 1982). This new paradigm will surely generate new myths about performance and alter the performance ideal, or ethos, in our culture.

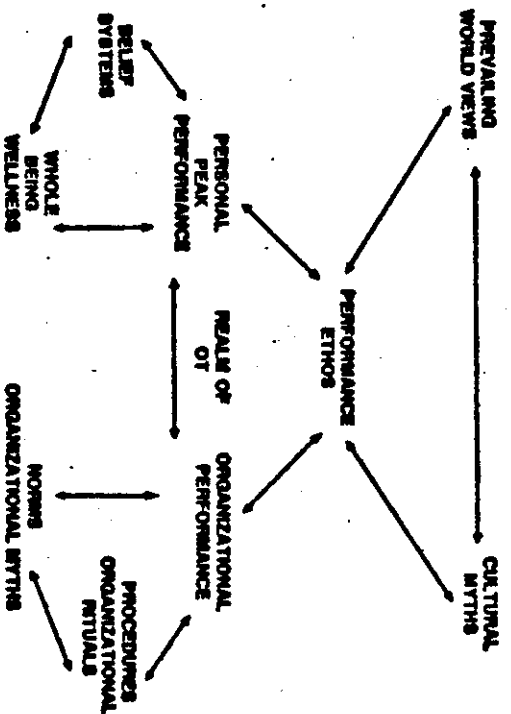


Figure 2. The realm of OT-performance focus

Transitions occurring in the global environment are, to some extent, being generated by organizational successes (e.g., technology) and excesses (e.g., acid rain). In turn, these sweeping changes are exerting tremendous pressures on organizations, leading to the decline of many traditional "bread and butter" industries and the meteoric rise of new, high-technology industries. Both decline and rapid growth create tension. As is well-known, organizational systems tend to be persistent in their form and function. Their internal norms (the unwritten rules or expectations about "correct" behavior) and myths (the "off-told tales") provide both status quo maintenance and membership boundaries on an informal level. The organization's procedures and "rituals" provide the same pressures for persistence on a more formalized level (see Chapter 14, "Facilitating Organizational Transformation: The Uses of Myth and Ritual"). Equilibrium is maintained without much difficulty until external pressures for change arise from the environment and/or from organizational members. When this happens at a significant level, system performance falters until new internal procedures and rituals are adopted that are more in tune with the times. The norms and myths can be expected to provide a continuing drag or resistance to these needed changes. The myths will change very slowly unless they are worked with directly to speed their adaptation.

No organizational system can perform at its peak unless enough individual members are willing and able to perform at their peaks. Even if the organization's norms, myths, rituals, and procedures are aligned with its purpose (assuming the purpose is clear), individual performance may not be high. The performance

ethos provided by the external environment may work against performance (e.g., "I work in order to afford the play style I want, and no harder"), as may the person's own level of well-being and basic belief systems. Poor physical health can impair performance, as can underutilization of capabilities and the absence of emotional and spiritual supports. Likewise, personally limiting beliefs such as "I am an innocent bystander in the universe," "We must restore the 'good old days,'" and "I am inferior" have an obvious adverse effect on one's performance.

PERSONAL PEAK PERFORMANCE

Each of the corners of the PPP triangle portrayed in Figure 3 is discussed in some detail. Suggestions for the exploration of each (peak performance, whole-being wellness, and belief systems) are also given.

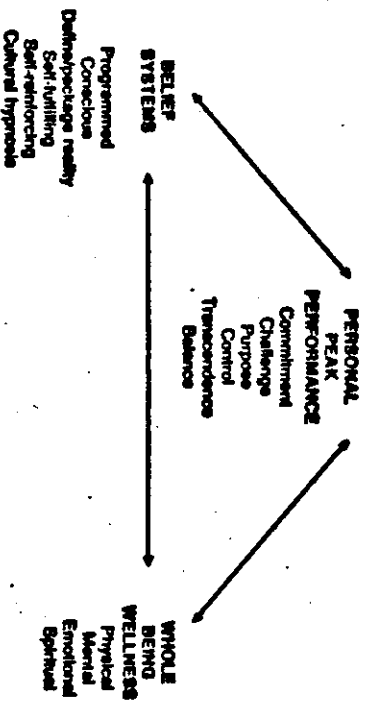


Figure 3. Some key considerations in achieving and maintaining personal peak performance

Over the next few decades, organizations will highly value people who can achieve and maintain excellent, or peak, levels of performance. While much work needs to be done with organizational and work team variables that have a clear effect on people's performance, this alone will not be sufficient. Attention must be paid to individuals, and support must be provided to facilitate their personal transformations.

Let us first explore the nature of PPP. I have asked participants in a large number of seminars and workshops to describe what the experience of PPP has been like for them—how it feels and some of the defining conditions. The words most often used to describe PPP have been: energized, totally focused, enthusiastic, exhilarated, inner peace, attuned, confident, resonance, powerful, alert, flowing,

and automatic. Such feelings are closely aligned with Maslow's (1965) notions about peak experiences. It may be that PPPs are nearly always accompanied by peak sensations or emotion; however, the reverse is not necessarily true.

Based on my own and others' explorations, I have identified six conditions which evoke and sustain excellence in performance. These six conditions, as seen in Figure 3 and outlined in Table 1, are not innate and can be learned or adopted by anyone. Unfortunately, many organizations today operate in ways which stifle many of these conditions.

Table 1.

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| Conditions Which Stimulate Personal Peak Performance |
| COMMITMENT Investments of feeling and time Primacy of internal goals and rewards |
| CHALLENGE Moving out of comfort zone Developing work case scenario and taking calculated risks Focusing on results, not perfection Mental rehearsal of desired outcomes |
| PURPOSE Clear and accepted focus for effort |
| CONTROL Balance of autonomy and direction |
| TRANSCENDENCE Overcoming self-limiting beliefs Focusing on process, not barriers |
| BALANCE Work and nonwork Time for family and friends Regular relaxation habit Managing stress and protecting health |

Commitment

One condition which is common to several explorations is a strong sense of *commitment*. A University of Chicago research team (Pinney, 1980) found that a high level of commitment protected people from the adverse effects of high stress levels and heavy workloads. Valli (1982) similarly hypothesized that large investments of both "time" and "feeling" are necessary ingredients if one wants to generate high levels of performance in a work group. In interviews with over 1500 peak performers, Charles Garfield (Larson, 1982a, b) found primacy of internal goals and intrinsic rewards was a widely shared characteristic. Garfield's peak performers also were working on tasks they cared a great deal about.

Challenge

A second major condition for stress resistance and peak performance identified by the University of Chicago team was a sufficient level of *challenge*. Garfield also described his peak performers as continually moving out of their "comfort zones" to take calculated risks. When peak performers are faced with a challenge, they consider the implications of failure and ask themselves, "Can I live with them?" If the answer is yes, they move ahead. Garfield also found that peak performers meet challenge by focusing on results (rather than on being perfect) and on solutions to problems (rather than on placing blame). Finally, Garfield found that peak performers use imagery in a focused way to mentally rehearse the various facets and feelings associated with the challenge.

Purpose

A third condition for maintaining excellence in performance is *purpose*. Valli (1982) suggested that alignment with a clear focus or sense of purpose is necessary for maintaining high levels of performance. Peak performers need to know what the mission or purpose behind the performance is, and they need to agree that it is the right one. [Several chapters in this book emphasize the importance of working with a clear sense of purpose.]

Control

A fourth condition identified by the University of Chicago team is sufficient *control* over our approach to a task. This means having enough discretion to exercise our judgment while not being left without guidance or standards. Garfield found that his peak performers regularly both sought and provided a balance of autonomy and direction, to provide the appropriate amount of control in any given situation.

Transcendence

A fifth condition which Garfield found common among peak performers was the person's drive to *transcend* previous performance levels. Our presumed limits are usually erroneous and rooted in self-limiting beliefs. Regular peak performers are able to concentrate on the *process* of functioning and not on artificial barriers. For example, the four-minute mile was once widely believed to be an insurmountable

able athletic barrier. Shortly after track star Roger Banister transcended his own previous performance (and this "barrier"), many other milers began to break the barrier.

Balance

A fifth condition for sustaining excellence in performance, balance, is further explored below in the section on whole-being wellness. Garfield found that his peak performers were hard workers, but they were not workaholics. They maintained a balance between work, family, friends, and other pursuits. They knew how to relax and to take steps to manage their stress and protect their health.

CONSCIOUSNESS OF PERSONAL PEAK PERFORMANCE EXPERIENCES

Our experiences of PPPs are not lost in our unconscious, but are filed in a perhaps forgotten part of our consciousness. Thus, we can bring them forward for investigation. When we do, we discover that our PPPs cluster into themes. If we become aware of the thematic nature of our past PPPs, of the described feelings accompanying PPPs, and of the basic conditions necessary for them to occur, then we become able to consciously evoke peak performances. A second characteristic of this consciousness-raising process is that on different occasions—perhaps reflecting different emotional states—we are likely to recall different experiences of peak performance and to discover new themes. Thus, recollection should be undertaken periodically, rather than being viewed as a "one-shot" activity. A awareness of the thematic nature of our PPPs can help us to identify our "vocation," or core purpose in life.

An activity: One very good way to bring these PPPs forward is to divide your life into significant periods. The periods you select will be different from those selected by others. Once this has been done, spend about 15 minutes reflecting on the PPPs you can recall from each of the identified periods. Some PPPs may occur in more than one period; some periods may not yield any PPPs (a significant event for you to ponder, should this occur). Stay with the task even if you feel finished, for some of the most significant PPPs are recalled after "plateau" periods. Try to avoid self-censorship. After 15 minutes, review the recollections in a search for themes. This process is enhanced if you work with one or two partners, since the feedback/helping process often uncovers new material for both the helper and the helpee. After the review is complete, continue together to explore how, when, and where PPPs might be consciously evoked both on and off the job.

Two factors which affect our PPPs are the level of overall well-being and the nature of our personal beliefs. If we choose to work toward whole-being wellness, and if we work to alter or replace self-limiting and self-defeating beliefs, we can further enhance our prospects for evoking PPPs.

WHOLE-BEING WELLNESS

Obviously, limitations in our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being can inhibit our evoking PPPs. Conversely, it is likely that high-level well-being can enhance the level of performance possible. Thus, efforts to enhance overall wellness are important. Most illnesses these days are caused by a multitude of factors which interact in complex ways. These factors include stress, the environment, our genetic predispositions, our previous health experiences, the nature and quality of our health care, and our daily lifestyle choices.

The U.S. Center for Disease Control in Atlanta estimates that the risks to one's health are about 20 percent biological, 20 percent environmental, 10 percent medical care, and 50 percent lifestyle. The majority of the risks to our health are determined by our everyday choices about how we live.

The primary issue in health protection, then, is to address those factors which are controllable (lifestyle plus portions of the environmental and medical care risks). The following list contains measures to control risk factors generally recognized by public health educators.

- Nutritional habits (avoidance of sugar, salt, fat, white flour and rice, and caffeine; plenty of complex carbohydrates)
- Moderation in the use of alcohol
- Not using tobacco
- Not using drugs (including prescription drugs)
- Sufficient restful sleep
- Regular relaxation/meditation habits
- Regular exercise (aerobic, stretching, and recreational)
- Recommended body weight
- Positive psychological outlook
- Good personal relationships
- Seatbelt use and safe driving habits
- Moderation and self-control of Type A Behavior (Friedman and Rosenman, 1974)
- Control of blood pressure and cholesterol
- Avoidance of unnecessary stressors and effective coping with unavoidable stressors
- Healthful and appropriate expression of emotions

Numerous studies have shown that the more of these habits we practice, the better our day-to-day health will be, and the longer we can expect to live (see, for example, Belloc and Breslow, 1972).

Unfortunately, during prolonged periods of high or peak performance (as well as during periods of high stress), many of us give up these positive health habits. The periods when we most need to protect our health are the very times when we ignore controllable risk factors. Fortunately, there is a way to tell how much the high performance period or other stressors are "getting to us." The following list itemizes some of the most frequent "strain" symptoms I have identified—indicators that the risks to our health are rising to significant levels:

- Feel slow, sluggish, weak
- Tire easily
- Rapid weight gain or loss
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Changed eating patterns
- Smoke/drink more than usual
- Sleep disorders
- Headaches, stiff neck and shoulders
- Nervous, apprehensive
- Depressed
- Irritable, easily angered
- Cynical, inappropriate humor
- Withdrawal from supportive relationships

These conditions are warning signals, and the first step to protecting and enhancing our well-being is to become sensitized to our own unique strain symptoms. Second, we must reflect on the controllable risk factors, especially as the strain symptoms become manifest, and make improvements as needed.

An activity: First, review the above listed symptoms of strain and make an assessment of how many you currently or recently have been experiencing. The more you can identify with, the greater the present risks to your health. Second, see if you can find those symptoms which regularly occur as early warning signals for you among the items on the strain list. It is very important to know what these are and to pay attention to them when they occur, since they are blood-feedback messages telling you that your body is likely to break down soon if you don't begin doing something differently! Third, go back to the list of measures to control risk factors, and make an appraisal of your present life style. Identify potential prospects for improvement. Finally, honestly answer these seven questions.

1. Are there present situations in my life which I should avoid or unhook from?

2. How, and how well, am I coping with unavoidable stressors?
3. Am I making responsible choices to reduce unnecessary risks to my health?
4. What am I doing well that I should continue doing?
5. What should I be doing less of or stop doing?
6. What should I be doing more of or start doing?
7. What kinds of support, guidance, or direct assistance do I need? From whom?

These four steps (overall strain assessment, identification of warning signals, overall risk factor assessment, and responding to the seven questions) are suggested as an effective way to protect and enhance your overall level of well-being. When needed changes are identified, one is often inclined to attempt all of the desired changes at once. This usually does not work, since the magnitude of the needed changes, when taken all at once, often becomes overwhelming. A more successful approach is to take relatively small actions one step at a time. This approach, of course, makes whole-being wellness into a life-long learning process. (For a more detailed exploration of the concept of whole being wellness, see Adams, 1980; 1981a; 1981b.)

An important dimension of whole-being wellness is our *beliefs* about health and well-being. Basically, if we believe ourselves to be "well", we will be "well." In their ongoing work with cancer patients, for example, the Simonses (Mathews-Simonsen, 1982) have had some major successes and some major disappointments in using self-hypnosis and visualization techniques in conjunction with more traditional modes of treatment. One of their conclusions is that visualization activities work if the patient believes they will work, and they do not work if the patient does not believe. The next section explores this critical dimension.

BELIEF SYSTEMS

Just like past peak performances, our belief systems are contained in our conscious minds, and are therefore directly accessible. This permits us to easily bring them forward in our consciousness for review and possible change.

To further extend the idea that our beliefs have a direct effect on our health, consider the case of mass hysteria and the use of placebo to successfully treat certain symptoms. During late 1982, several people died after taking across-the-counter pain relievers which someone had intentionally contaminated with cyanide. These poisonings received a great deal of coverage in the media, and virtually everyone in America was well aware of them. Shortly after this, a spectator at a high school football game became ill after drinking a soda. As a result of the widespread poisoning anxiety, about 200 other people attending the game—who

had drunk the same kind of soda—exhibited poisoning symptoms and were hospitalized. Several people's symptoms were so severe they were kept for overnight observation. No poison traces were ever found in the soda. If our beliefs can have this effect, they certainly can have equally powerful positive effects if we can understand the process better!

Our beliefs also directly affect our performance since they define our reality for us. They help us to focus and to relate to the world, and they provide boundaries on what we are sensitive to, cutting us off from a great many alternatives. For example, if one believes oneself to be systematic, logical, analytical, and thorough, one is likely to be a good problem solver who never overlooks details. The limitations which accompany such beliefs are that one is likely to overstructure, to draw premature boundaries, to be rather inflexible, and to resist contradicting information. As another example, if one's beliefs are intuitive, spontaneous, holistic, and relativistic, one is likely to be able to find the meaning behind situations and to step back and see the broader issues. The limitations which accompany such beliefs are that one is likely to be impulsive, ungrounded, and impatient with structure. Clearly, each system of beliefs has its assets and its liabilities as related to performance. With awareness of the self-limiting beliefs we hold within our belief systems, we have the opportunity to alter them, or to add new beliefs, in order to reduce our limitations and enhance our performance.

What Are Beliefs?

Put most simply, a belief is something that one accepts as true without needing supportive evidence. It is a statement of fact one makes to oneself. Beliefs, however, do not constitute reality, though we usually take them for reality. They are only statements about reality. They cause us to filter out or transform certain information from all that is available to us, and they package our experience.

We are utterly convinced by our beliefs. While every belief we hold has served a useful purpose at some time, it is likely that we each hold beliefs that we no longer use. If we do not examine our beliefs from time to time, we become increasingly limited by those beliefs which no longer serve a useful purpose.

Initially, our beliefs come to us as messages from our environment (especially during our preadolescent years), which receive continual reinforcement. The environment, of course, is the culture we are socialized in, complete with all of its myths and rituals. Thus, to a very great extent, we are hypnotized by our culture. As we grow up, our patterns of conscious thought reflect our beliefs. These patterns are made more conscious by our "self talk"—our inner dialogues—which serve both to reflect and to reinforce our beliefs.

If our experience runs counter to one of our beliefs, we are likely to have an emotional response. For example, if one is habitually angered by rush hour traffic and by long lines at the bank and the airport, it may be because one has the (unexamined) belief that one should never be made to wait. Thus, another way to become conscious of our beliefs is to pay attention to those things which regularly trigger emotional responses in us.

Beliefs Are Self-Fulfilling and Self-Reinforcing

Our experiences may not always follow our desires, but they do reflect our beliefs which, as statements of reality to ourselves, are strongly self-fulfilling. They provide a constant and powerful hypnotic suggestion, causing us to acquiesce to any idea that is reinforced by our own self-talk and to reject any idea that runs counter to it.

One commonly experienced example of this is whether or not one expects to learn something from a given "educational" event, such as a lecture or a group discussion. Those who come to the event with the expectation that they will learn something new nearly always do. Those who expect it to be a waste of time nearly always find that it is. If members of either group are "surprised," it is because there is another (also unexamined) compelling belief operating.

Collective Beliefs

Our families, our organizations, and our communities all operate to reinforce a "correct" system of beliefs. Since we must react from the frame of reference of our own beliefs, we resist changes in beliefs that others in our family, organization, or community make. We either try to get the person or organization to revert to the old, collective, belief or we reject them.

These collective beliefs tell us what is "good" and what is "bad"; what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. The more strongly we accept the collective beliefs and receive reciprocal acceptance, the better we feel. For example, there was (and still is to a certain degree) a collective belief in the United States that the most successful, influential, intelligent, and wealthy people are males whose families originally came from a few European countries. People who did not exhibit these characteristics (women, blacks, Latinos, native Americans, Asians, etc.), but who did accept these collective beliefs about themselves, seldom experienced success, influence, "intelligence," or wealth. Instead, they often experienced depression and frustration, and they perennially accepted a second-class position in the society. These groups generally have not "progressed" in the U.S. culture until they have collectively altered their beliefs to be more supportive of their own characteristics.

Collective beliefs in an organization are reflected by the myths of the organization. As Harrison Owen points out (again, see Chapter 14), these collective beliefs, as expressed in the myths, have a strong effect on the performance of both the individuals and the overall organization.

Of many possible futures, the one which does occur will be a manifestation of interacting collective belief systems operating around the world.

Changing Beliefs

The first step to changing our belief systems is awareness. Inaccurate and self-limiting beliefs continue to be accepted until we examine them and make an effort to change them. Since we often can see beliefs in others they cannot see in themselves, it is helpful to examine our beliefs in an interactive setting.

In formal hypnosis, we accept the hypnotist's reality and suspend our own beliefs. Subjects have readily developed blisters on their arms in response to a hypnotist's suggestion that they have been burned. In order to "dehypnotize" ourselves, we must first learn to hypnotize ourselves intentionally. To change a belief means to work against messages from authorities, the patterns of our thinking, our "self-talk," and our emotional triggers. Thus, we need to assume the authority of the hypnosis ourselves, to visualize new beliefs and to create intentional self-talk.

Clearly, with unexamined beliefs, the power is in the past and beyond our control. When we examine and work with our beliefs, the power is in the now and under our control.

An activity: To increase your awareness of your belief systems, you must first get in touch with the consistent messages you received in late childhood—roughly between the ages of eight and twelve. Allow yourself to become relaxed and attentive and then spend several minutes recalling messages you once received from each of these sources: parents, teachers, friends, significant others (e.g., grandparents, neighbors), the "community," and role models. In some cases, messages may not arise in your awareness so much as images of the actual people. Exploring what these people represent can help identify further messages.

The second place to look for beliefs is in recalling the really significant events that have occurred since childhood, since your recollection process is also focused by your beliefs. Third, make a list of those situations which regularly trigger emotions (joy, anger, excitement, depression) in you. Fourth, make a list of the most frequent topics in your self-talk, or internal dialogues. It is this self-talk which reinforces beliefs and makes them persistent. Finally, imagine what the future will be like and list the images which come to mind. Our expectations and predictions also are strongly influenced by our beliefs.

With these five lists, you are now ready to look for themes and, out of these, to list your basic beliefs by looking at the themes contained in the lists. This step is often most effective if done with another person, since both of you are likely to discover additional beliefs from the sharing process.

After you have established an awareness of your basic beliefs, you can easily review them with a focus on your overall wellness and on your personal performance. You undoubtedly will find that some of your beliefs contribute to your wellness and/or to your performance, and that others detract from them.

Finally, as you become aware of beliefs you wish to change, identify actions you can take to validate the new, more desirable beliefs. Establishing new, deliberate self-talk messages can be most helpful. Developing clear visualizations which represent the new or altered beliefs is also important. For example, if I conclude that one of my beliefs is that "I am not an effective public speaker," and if making formal presentations is a necessary aspect of my job, I can begin to alter this belief by identifying some safe ways to practice making speeches. I can begin telling myself "I am an effective speaker." I can visualize myself making a superb presentation. This visualization can be enhanced and made even more effective by actually rehearsing the body language part of the speech in front of a mirror.

For a further exploration of the nature of personal belief systems, see Roberts (1974) and Woolfolk and Richardson (1978).

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