



Peak States and Neurofeedback

Lincoln Stoller, PhD, 2014

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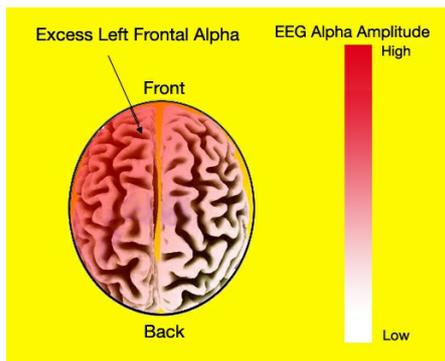
A peak state is an expansive state of mind that underlies insightful thought and enlightened action. It is roughly equivalent to a state of spiritual awakening.

Peak states are relegated to the realm of the exceptional in Western religions, are largely ignored by psychiatry, and only appeared in the liminal realm of transpersonal psychology in the 1960s. Our culture generally ignores the whole issue and considers people in a peak state as being unusual or aberrant. On the contrary, these highly functional states are available to everyone.

Habits of Thought and Patterns of Brainwaves

Some patterns of thinking are directly identifiable in your brainwaves, while other complex thought patterns are not clearly reflected in these electrical signals. Neurofeedback training, or brainwave biofeedback, offers two ways for you to interact with your brainwaves in order to change aspects of your character.

One way is to learn to generate different brainwaves. This is a simple training in coordination. The other approach is a training that involves the subtle interaction between electrical and thought patterns in which you think certain thoughts while you learn to modulate your brainwaves. You can achieve peak states by learning to manage these subtle interactions. This is better understood by first considering simple interactions.



Excess frontal alpha in depression.

Neurofeedback training can address issues that are clearly felt and easily described. It offers a simple solution to anxiety, depression, and issues related to confusion, disequilibrium, and lack of focus. For example, depression is reduced by lowering the amount of mid-range oscillations emanating from one's left pre-frontal lobe. By training a person to produce fewer of these alpha waves, to have less of this "vibration" you might say, one generates fewer depressive thoughts and is less captivated by the depressive thoughts that remain.

While difficult to affect through traditional psychotherapy, issues of this kind can be addressed using neurofeedback. The results are quick, effective, painless, permanent, and do not involve medication. It is a measure of our culturally conformist thinking – in contrast with the fallacy of independent thought that our culture entertains about itself – that neurofeedback is not enthusiastically embraced, and psychotherapy and pharmaceuticals are not emphatically discarded. (See "Is there an Anti-Neurofeedback Conspiracy?" by Karen F. Trocki, in Journal of Addictions Nursing, 17:199--202, 2006)

Our lack of understanding of peak states is further evidence of our "tribe mentality" — in particular, Western culture's view of people as resources rather than agents of



growth — and our individual belief that our identity requires our adherence to this social meme. In this context peak states, which are actually states of full function, are a threat to authority and social identity. If they are considered at all, peak states are considered unauthorized religious experience, pretension of genius, or unemployable lunacy.



Our tribe.

Before respect for intuition was crushed by naïve reductionist thinking, our greatest thinkers recognized the connection between art and reason, madness and inspiration. Socrates said, "The greatest blessing granted to mankind comes by way of madness, which is a divine gift... The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." How many of today's authorities would agree? How many of today's corporations would care?

Peak States



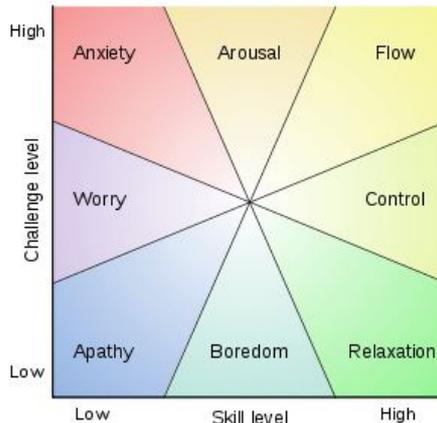
A small minority of people are in a "peak state" of mind, and in many cases what we think of as peak states are not, but are only brief peak experiences. A basic question regarding peak states is whether they are a nature state of health that should be available to everyone, or whether they are an unusual state available only to some people.

Peak states are states of optimal function. Three of the roughly 80 such states are the 'Inner Peace,' the 'Underlying Happiness,' and the 'Gratitude' states.

In the Inner Peace state, one has a continuous feeling of peace even while feeling painful emotions. Past traumas no longer have any charge.

In the Underlying Happiness state, a feeling of happiness underlies all other feelings. This feeling exists simultaneously even with difficult feelings such as sadness or anger.

In the Gratitude state, one has a sensation of gratitude at all times. This enhances one's fundamental connection to earth, to spirit, and to other peak states. It also increases one's ability to positively manifest one's own reality.



The interaction of challenge and skill in creating one's state of mind.



In contrast, there are many unusual, isolated, and static states of mind that offer peace or pleasure but do not illuminate one's connection to the world. These states may be palliative, such as opiate treatment of pain; they may be creative, such as the disembodied state induced by smoking DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine); or they may be dysfunctional when experienced out of context, such as the Buddhist state of sunyata, a state of disconnection and emptiness. These

therapeutic, catalytic, or transitional experiences are extreme states of mind but are not "peak states."

The Mystery of Alpha-Theta

In 1989, Eugene Peniston and Paul Kulkosky developed a version of alpha-theta brainwave neurofeedback as a therapy for chronic alcohol addiction. The treatment combined brainwave training, relaxation therapy, visualization, psychotherapy, and social reorientation. This approach has been found to yield an 85% success rate, the highest success rate of any approach.

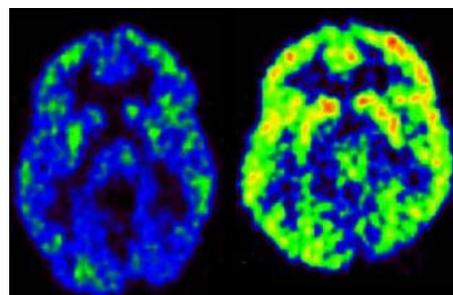


Peniston described the genesis of this approach in his 1998 article, "[The Peniston-Kulkosky Brainwave Neurofeedback Therapeutic Protocol: The Future Psychotherapy for

Alcoholism/PTSD/Behavioral Medicine(<http://www.aeets.org/article47.htm>)]".

"Interest in the combination of alpha-theta training evolved from investigation of sleep and creativity... In an effort to facilitate production of the reverie state and hypnagogic imagery, the investigators developed an alpha-theta biofeedback system that provided information to the subject about both alpha and theta production... The investigators thought that the production of the alpha-theta twilight state 'should prove to be a powerful technique for the study of creativity enhancement in particular, and the hypnagogic state in general.' They suggested the possibility of using the alpha-theta state for psychotherapy."

No one understands how this training works at a fundamental level, though it is suggested that there is a connection between electrical activity in the brain and states of consciousness. The idea is that by attaining higher states of consciousness, or having spiritual awakenings and deep personal insights, people are able to recreate their personalities.



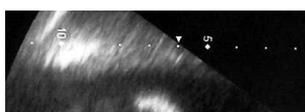
Differences in brain state.

This same alpha-theta therapy has since been applied with great success in the treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as a means of enhancing surgical skill, and as a tool for improving musical expression. In short, alpha-theta "therapy" may be a tool that makes anyone recover from, or better at, almost anything!

Training Peak States

A peak state is a persistent, productive state of mind that lends a measure of immunity from habitual negative thought patterns, or negative patterns present in a person's environment. Peak states are not hard to describe, but they are rare. Knowing how to attain peak states would benefit everyone.

One reason put forward for their rarity is the ubiquity of traumatizing events blocking the maturation of a fully enabled mental state, yet traumatizing events are themselves somewhat of a mystery: Why do past, non-recurring negative events block healthy growth in a way that the conscious mind cannot resolve? Perhaps this is the wrong question. Perhaps the better approach is to simply ignore the limitations of the conscious mind and find another way to train a person to achieve peak states.



Grant McFetridge has spent the last few decades cataloging and trying to understand peak states. He is one of the few people doing this at his [Institute for the Study of Peak States](#) in British Columbia. He notes



several approaches that train peak states using either "power therapies" or positive affirmation.

Power therapies are new approaches to the treatment of PTSD based on a connection between one's state of mind and energy patterns stored in the body. This new and loosely defined term includes approaches such as the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), Eye Movement Desensitization Retraining (EMDR), and others. I won't discuss those techniques here.

Visualization and affirmation techniques have long been offered by authors of self-help books on such topics as relationship counseling ("[The Learning to Love Yourself Workbook](#)" by Gay Hendricks, 1990), personal empowerment ("[The 15-Minute Miracle Revealed](#)" by Jacquelyn Aldana, 2003), and achieving financial success ("[Think and Grow Rich](#)" by Napoleon Hill, 1937).

At its root the alpha-theta neurofeedback therapy is a visualization and affirmation technique. The emphasis most practitioners place on its brainwave training probably stems from their underlying prejudice against self-help techniques and in support of reductionist biological models of behavior. The unusual power of the alpha-theta therapy lies not in what you learn to do with your brainwaves but in the way the therapy joins affirmation with biofeedback to allow communication between the conscious mind that voices what it wants to affirm, and the unconscious mind that accepts this affirmation.

If the goal is to learn how to achieve a peak state, then an obvious method is to apply the appropriate affirmation in the context of alpha-theta neurofeedback training. This should be more effective than applying visualization and affirmation by themselves because neurofeedback training facilitates the internalizing of conscious intention.

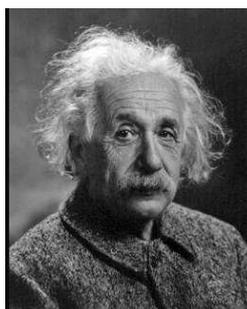
I have done this with a version of Aldana's 15-Minute Miracle. I chose her approach because it is comprehensive, personal, and safe. It is comprehensive because it can be applied to coordinating the three main structures of consciousness: the mind, the body, and the emotions. It is personal because it can be tailored to address each person's own strengths and goals. It is safe in that it avoids trauma and focuses entirely on positive ends.

The alpha-theta protocol could be used in conjunction with other goal attainment visualizations, such as Gay Hendricks' prescription for attaining a state of self-love, or for the more difficult trauma reduction visualizations associated with birth trauma or "[past life regressions](#)".



McFetridge and his group have developed their own methods of resolving the developmental traumas that he says block the natural emergence of peak states. A regression technique he developed he calls the Whole-Hearted Healing™ technique. He reports that this method takes fairly long and involves serious dangers, saying, "Some people may trigger overwhelmingly suicidal feelings, memories of abuse, and a host of other severe physical and emotional experiences."

"Power therapy" techniques that use meridians and affirmations induce certain peak states in most of those trained though the changes in state vary in permanence and are less to much less effective in resolving severe trauma, an area where neurofeedback and regression therapy has had success. If the use of neurofeedback is as safe and effective in attaining peak states as it is in remediating addiction, then we might expect approaches that incorporate neurofeedback to have greater power in developing deep and permanent peak states.



The cosmic religious experience is the strongest and the noblest driving force behind scientific research.

(Albert Einstein)

A New Approach

To my knowledge, I am the first to use alpha-theta neurofeedback to enhance self-help power therapies. The idea seems so obvious that I suspect others will soon make the same connection. On the other hand, I am combining different ideas that have remained separate for decades.

There is a small group of therapists and self-help trainers exploring this cross-disciplinary area. My efforts to solicit the interest of traditional therapists in embracing peak states (see my presentation, *Using Neurofeedback as Enlightenment Training*) demonstrated that most professionals prefer to retain the traditional focus on states of sickness and the maintenance of average health or ill health. As a result, most neurofeedback practitioners don't even know of the existence of peak states!

For the moment, I am happy to say, if you want to explore this easy, painless, permanent, and safe method to attain a pervasive state of gratitude that will enhance your fundamental connection to earth, to spirit, and to other peak states, then you must train with me!

On the other hand, before achieving a peak state you must consider whether you are ready to incorporate it into your life. Just because peak states are our normal states does not mean they will not cause disruption.



Making yourself into something new means leaving something old behind.

"One woman said ... that she wanted to directly experience God. When offered to have the opportunity to have the state induced in her right on the spot, she refused and instead quickly left. This wasn't because she didn't expect it to work -- on the contrary, she was afraid that it would."

-- Grant McFetridge, from *Peak States of Consciousness, Theory and Applications, Volume 2*, p. 399.

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