

# IMAGING

## What You See Is What You Get

Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D.

While studying people identified as creative geniuses, I was fascinated at how frequently they would describe holding a vivid picture of a new possibility in their mind until they finally found a way to create it successfully. The “it” might be a scientific discovery as in the case of the double helix, a technological breakthrough as in heavier-than-air flight, a sports achievement such as winning the Rose Bowl, or a medical breakthrough such as a cure for polio.

There is a field of medicine called psychoneuroimmunology, which studies the link between our beliefs (or mental pictures), our nervous system and our immune system. A growing number of case studies report patients learning to speed their recovery time following surgery. They do so by using a process called imaging to program the body to participate positively before, during and through their recovery. Surgeons report far less bleeding at the site of surgery, and patients recover their normal body functions of elimination much easier and faster while experiencing significantly less pain or other complications. Some patients have learned to use mental imaging instead of anesthesia to block pain during certain medical processes. It’s as if patients can learn to program their body to work with a medical process and heal more rapidly from illnesses by practicing a process of mental relaxation and then creating positive mental pictures/expectations of a successful healing process.

What does this have to do with you and me? Isn’t it true that all of us (or at least most of us) would like to perform better in all areas of our life? By learning to tune into our mental expectations, pictures and self-talk, can we significantly improve our performance on the job, in sports, in relationships and essentially in everything we do?

### Where Do We Find Evidence That Imaging Produces Positive Results?

Most top-performing sports figures describe using a form of imaging to elevate their performance. Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky and Greg Louganis all use(d) mental imagery in order to improve results.

Woods imagines himself producing the perfect swing and playing the perfect shot immediately before doing exactly that. Bunkers or obstacles don't exist in his mental images. He credits his father with teaching him to “putt to the picture.”



*Ann McGee-Cooper & Associates, Inc.*

4236 Hockaday • Dallas, Texas 75229 214.357.8550 • 1.800.477.8550  
website – [www.amca.com](http://www.amca.com)

Louganis, an Olympic gold medalist in diving, would visualize somebody else performing a dive, and when he could see it carried out perfectly, he would imagine himself performing the same dive. He visualized himself performing each dive perfectly approximately 40 times as he listened to relaxing music before actually stepping up on the board to perform the dive.

Nicklaus would walk the course the evening before a major golf event and visualize playing each hole perfectly. Gretsky learned to get into a relaxed focus, also called “the zone.” In this state, he visualized skating to where he sensed the puck was coming next.

Ice skaters such as Tara Lipinski and Michele Kwan describe learning to see themselves skating perfectly and skating for the fun of doing their best rather than putting pressure on themselves to outperform other skaters.



Vince Young, quarterback for the Texas Longhorns during the 2006 Rose Bowl, willed his team to win and used his positive energy to focus himself and his team to do just that. In a remarkable finish, Vince himself ran the ball over the goal line, never doubting that somehow, someday, his team would win.



On the other hand, we have all watched individual athletes freeze under pressure and

significantly underperform. And probably each of us has suffered a similar personal disappointment, working really hard to get to a place where our efforts can make a difference, only to fall back. As you reflect on this painful memory, is it true that the closer you got to the opportunity to achieve your all-time best performance, the more you entertained pictures of exactly what you didn't want to do? For example, “Don't screw up now! Don't fall! You are so close. Don't lose focus.” What can be useful toward improving performance is to realize how consistently our performance matches up with our positive or negative expectations. So if we can learn to change our expectations, this can go a long way toward improving our performance.

## How Do We Begin?

The first step is to choose to become aware of mental pictures and self-talk. Most of this lies just below the conscious level of awareness.

The second step is to take your new awareness of the expectations you create for yourself all day long and edit or reframe any that are negative or fall short of how you wish to perform. For example, if you go into a meeting expecting it to be a waste of time with lots of bickering, your expectation can actually contribute to what you don't want to happen. Why not reframe not only your mental picture or expectation, but also your contribution? What might happen if you go expecting only the best and prepare yourself to contribute to a best possible outcome for all stakeholders?

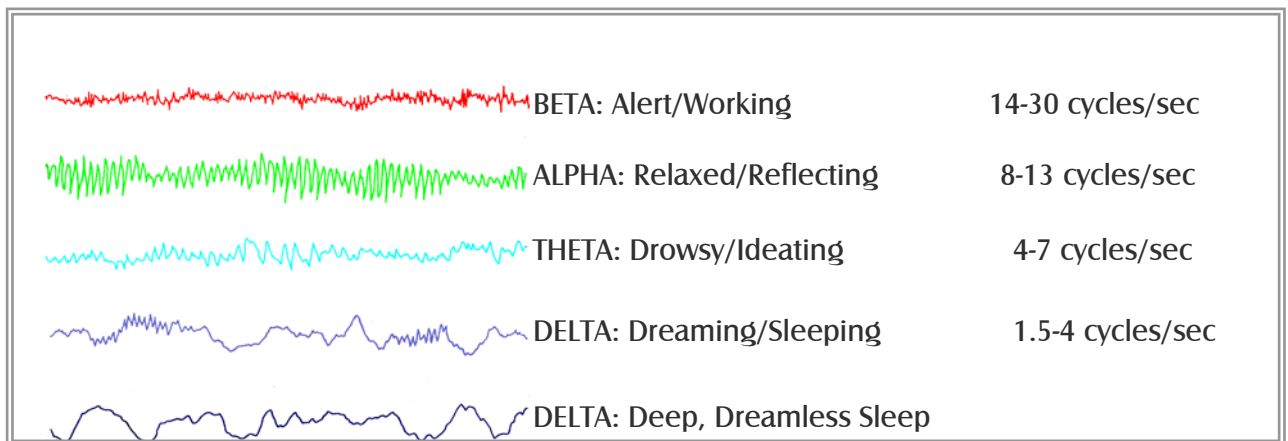
The third step is to make imaging part of your daily practice for how you prepare for your day and for each specific aspect that contributes to a high-quality life. Following is a step-by-step description of each part of the imaging process, along with an explanation of why it is important. The good news is that once you have practiced enough to make this second nature, it goes very fast and happens naturally. I'll explain that later.

## Steps For Successful Imaging: Tying Expectations to Actions

1. The first step is to get fully relaxed and grounded or tuned into yourself. It helps to get in a place where you have some privacy. Sit comfortably in a chair with both feet on the floor and your hands in your lap or resting comfortably on arm rests. Then begin to breathe deeply and slowly.

The purpose of this step is to become very aware of your body and open the energy flowing through it. Focus your awareness on your breathing. By slowing down your breath, you can also slow down your heart rate and the frequency of your brain waves. When you get to a range of 8 to 13 cycles-per-second (brain waves), which you will achieve naturally by simply slowing down your breathing, you are technically in a state called alpha. This is a relaxed, yet aware, state of mind. It is significant because, while in alpha, the left and right hemispheres of the brain become integrated, and you have the greatest expanded awareness, with access to both sides of your thinking and feeling processes.

It can help to imagine that you are walking along a beach and hearing the tide come in. By synchronizing your breathing to the rhythm of the tides you will automatically relax into an alpha state, which not only opens and integrates your brain hemispheres, but also brings a relaxed and renewing state of mind-body awareness.



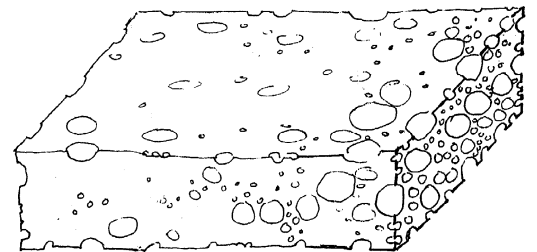
Our minds are like sponges during alpha brain wave periods. They “soak up” what we are thinking about. Our minds are naturally in alpha when we first awaken and for a short time before we drift into sleep. You can take advantage of these natural alpha windows by:

Morning imaging – during the first 20 minutes upon awakening:

- Visualize a successful day.

Evening imaging – as you relax and drift through alpha into sleep:

- First review the positives of your day;
- Harvest – replay any negatives as though you have learned from your mistakes;
- Then, if you are still awake, project yourself into the future – dream for tomorrow.



2. The second step of imaging is to imagine a favorite place. This can be a memory of walking along a beach, a hike in the mountains, relaxing in front of a crackling fire with someone you

love or other fun, renewing memories or fantasies. Call up specific sensory memories such as sights, smells, sounds and feelings. The reason for this is that your subconscious doesn't differentiate between a real event and a remembered or fantasized event. By focusing on very pleasing, successful, happy details of your fantasy, you will begin to generate very positive neuro-peptides called endorphins. These expand your mental capacity, as well as prepare you to remember times of greatest achievement and expect to repeat and exceed these fond memories. So have some fun staying focused on only very positive mental pictures of times of highest achievement, both alone and on a team. As you do this, you are programming your subconscious to prepare to repeat extraordinary success.

3. The third step is to rehearse something in the future that you want to achieve at a new level of excellence. It might be making a speech or presentation and being very engaging and successful. You may not yet have all the skills, knowledge or experience needed to reach your new goal. Remember daydreaming as a kid? What you didn't yet know, you made up as you went along. The most important thing is to build a belief that you can succeed and begin to rehearse extraordinary success until it feels real to you and becomes second nature. You will now have experienced this success so many times in your imagination that when the real opportunity comes along, you just move effortlessly into a level of performance that may surprise even you.

**NOTE:** This can be an artistic performance, an exam in any subject, a technical or athletic performance or an act of leadership. The topic is not as important as is your perseverance in enjoying the process of mentally expecting to perform at a much higher level. So, what if you fall

short in real life? Simply get curious about what you can learn from the experience, put this new learning to work for you and keep expecting the very best. The greatest challenge is to have the courage to get comfortable expecting the best and not fall back into the safety of anticipating mediocre performances. It takes no courage to become a really consistent pessimist. Yet choosing to be a consistent optimist requires not only courage, but the perseverance to keep going until your goals have been met. And once you achieve a new level of performance, chances are you will be eager to raise the bar. Success is as contagious as your appetite for challenge.

**TIP:** It can be very important to program into your mental rehearsal some unexpected challenge and then visualize yourself staying calm and finding a creative way around any and all barriers. Learning to stay calm under pressure and expecting to find a positive solution no matter what have a huge impact on your brain. Henry Ford once said, *"Whether you believe you can or you can't, you are right!"* You can see that he was providing a short course in imaging. He had learned that expectations have a huge impact on performance. The choice is there for each of us.

4. The fourth step in imaging is to program life balance into your visualization. Imagine a perfect life-work balance – what your life would be like as you create invigorating, regular exercise, good eating habits, quality time with those you love, renewing hobbies and interests to balance your passion for your work and spiritual renewal to keep you inspired and mindful that you are not alone but are connected to all things (or however you frame your spiritual beliefs. For some, it is a formal religious practice. For others, this sense comes from being in nature.) Whatever contributes to you becoming renewed, refreshed and balanced, feeling nurtured by all aspects of your life – this is what you want to visualize.



You may be thinking that this is so far from the current truth that this final step is impossible to achieve. Yet, go back to our premise. The expectation comes first. Then you will find creative ways to actualize what you intend for yourself. So in this final phase of imaging, step back from that single part of your life you are working to improve and visualize every aspect of your life being nurtured by your best self. Another way to say this is to ask if you were totally successful in every aspect of your life, what would your life look like, feel like, be like? Create this picture and enjoy the process of getting comfortable living in balance.

Many people convince themselves that life is a trade out. If you are successful professionally, you have to give up other parts of your life. Yet this is where self-fulfilling prophecy gets really interesting. Some people seem to find ways to bring positive expectation, energy and performance to every aspect of their life. How do they do it? They expect to do it and they mentally rehearse several versions of how their life might be until they create a best practice.

## What About Worry and Guilt?

Worry and guilt are very powerful negative pictures that can have a negative effect on your performance, energy and expectations. I don't know about you, but I have gotten really good at worrying and creating guilt. I can take the simplest event and embellish it until I'm very anxious and all my energy is focused on precisely what I don't want. I realize that it took me years of practice to get good at both worry and guilt. So if I want to unlearn these two counterproductive behaviors, it will take some time, perseverance and practice. I'm glad to report that I and those who our team have coached have made great progress replacing this negative set of behaviors. If you think about it, worry and guilt are forms of imaging taking you backwards. So if you already know how to sabotage your best performance, you're halfway toward visualizing success.

## Are There Parallels to Imaging in Spiritual Practices of Prayer and Meditation?

More than a few of our Clients are committed to a spiritual path that involves some form of prayer and/or meditation. Many of these have reported to us how helpful the imaging techniques were in their lives and work. We believe that there are clear parallels between imaging and these practices and encourage people of faith to continue those disciplines that help them follow the path they have chosen.

## New Research from the Field of Quantum Physics.

I was reviewing some research recently from the field of Quantum Physics regarding a now well-known phenomenon. We have learned that it is not possible for the observer to remain objective and not influence what is observed. Bell's Theorem, for example, states that when two electrons are paired and one is observed to spin up then the other spins down. If one is observed to spin left, then the other spins right. When the electrons are separated, no matter how far apart they are, when one electron is measured for its spin, the second electron will display an opposite spin, indicating that they remain "connected" across the universe. This helps us begin to appreciate that perhaps we are all connected and that we cannot help but impact all others on the planet.

Learning this, we can appreciate that the energy from whatever we choose to think, believe, plan and commit to has an impact on all other beings. Mahatma Gandhi challenges us to "become the change we want to see in the world." This seems to be a clear reminder that as we imagine, so shall we become.

### Resources

1. Galway, Timothy. *The Inner Game of Work*. New York: Random House, 2000.
2. Pert, Candace. *Molecules of Emotion*: New York: Scribner, 1997.

Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at [AMCA.com](http://AMCA.com)