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# Understanding NLP

## how it can help you

by Charlotte Hinksman NLP Master Practitioner

**What is Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)?** This is a question which gets asked regularly and I think it's useful to provide a comprehensive explanation in therapeutic terms, which also explains what kind of situations NLP can be effective for. NLP is also used in business and learning settings, which will be considered in a later article.

### *Explanation of specific terminology*

**Neuro** refers to the brain and the nervous system. The brain and the nervous system connect everything in your body – immune system, organs, skeleton etc.

**Linguistic** refers to the study of understanding the natural language of the brain and nervous system, i.e. how it absorbs external information through the senses, and how it codes and stores this information. It is in fully understanding this language that we can effectively 'talk' to the brain and nervous system, and gain direct communication.

**Programming** refers to the way your brain, mind and nervous system are all connected, and set up to do or not do certain things. It can be seen like computer programming, i.e. the 'software' of the brain. If you think about a computer, you have the screen, the hard drive and the keyboard – the 'hardware'. In order to do anything with it, it needs to have software too, e.g. Word, Excel, email, internet. What we can do with it depends on what software we have. It is the same for our brain. We need to 'programme the software' to be able to function, i.e. to have a personality, to have thoughts, feelings, emotions, beliefs, responses and behaviours.

The good news for computers and brains is if we do not like the way it is running, we can effectively re-programme the software to change what it does now, and get it to do more of what we want instead. If you had a problem with your email on your computer, you would try and sort it out yourself, or get someone to help you change it so it does what you need it to do. Using NLP with your brain is exactly the same thing

### How did NLP start?

NLP came about in the 1970s in California at the time hypnosis was popular. Hypnosis (and hypnotherapy) developed through the recognition that most of our beliefs and behaviours were generated unconsciously, e.g. we are unaware of it happening. If these were less than useful, a good way to change them was by putting our conscious mind (i.e. our aware, thinking mind) into a trance, and talking to the unconscious directly. However, with performances by stage hypnotists and various concerns raised within religious faiths, hypnosis was getting a bad name. At that time, mathematician Richard Bandler and assistant professor of Linguistics John Grinder recognising the importance of this unconscious part of the brain, thought there had to be a more ethical way to access the mind.

They studied the works of eminent psychotherapists: Gestalt therapy developer Fritz Perls, family therapy pioneer Virginia Satir, and medical doctor and hypnotherapist Milton Erickson. These practitioners achieved amazing results with their clients, and Bandler and Grinder were interested in their approach to bring about such positive change in people and empower them to continue living a happy life.

NLP has therefore arisen out of studying different disciplines, and the structure of excellence. How did these people achieve success and how can we teach other people to achieve success? How are some people ecstatically happy and healthy all the time? How can we take a skill someone has in one area of life and apply it in another? Out of this came an innovative new approach to understanding how the brain, mind and body work, and a new technology that allows us to change our way of thinking and return to our inherent excellence, so we can achieve what we want to achieve. This makes it very different to other forms of therapy such as traditional counselling and psychotherapy, which tend to focus on talking about problems, as opposed to solutions.

There are some very basic key assumptions of NLP which any NLP practitioner will work by:

- It's not so much the experience of life that makes a difference to how we feel, it is how we perceive those experiences.

For example, no two people will experience the same event in a similar way. Therefore, no two people ever perceive 'the world' in their minds the same way. No one way is better or worse, or real or not real. It's completely individual, personal and unique. An example of this is two people on a rollercoaster. One person may perceive it as fun and excitement, and their brain will produce chemicals which are associated with fun and joy (endorphins), whereas the next person may perceive the experience to be frightening and scary, so their brain would produce chemicals associated with fear (adrenaline). This emphasises again it is not the actual experience that matters, but the way we perceive it, which is completely unique to the individual.

- If one person can use their brain effectively, be happy and healthy and successful in life, then everyone else's brain is capable of the same thing.

The hardware is the same, it is just the software that is different, i.e. more or less effective at being happy. This way of thinking can be changed to help your brain do more of what you want it to do! This is a wonderful way of viewing human potential. We are all inherently excellent, it is just that sometimes, our brain needs reminding.

## How does NLP work?

The brain, nervous system and therefore immune system and all the organs that function in your body (remember your skin is also an organ) and skeleton are connected.



The brain and the mind are without a doubt connected also (some may argue they are in fact the same thing). It is well researched and documented in the medical and psychological fields that the mind and the body are connected. In other words, how we feel psychologically affects our body and therefore our health. A simple example: the well known fact that psychological stress lowers our immune system (due to a release in certain hormones) and makes us more susceptible to illness.

We also know our body responds to certain thoughts or images that go through our minds. For example, if I ask you to picture a lemon, and imagine cutting into it and tasting it, you will make a picture in your head and you will start salivating and your stomach will get ready to eat it. Your body thinks the lemon is real and you are ingesting it! Another more obvious and

somewhat unspoken example of this is how by just thinking about a sexual image produces feelings of arousal in the body. Therefore, this unconscious part of your brain does not quite know the difference between what is real and what is not real.

You can imagine the consequences of this in some cases, for example the person who is scared of flying on planes. They create pictures in their head of the terrible plane crash they are about to have, and their unconscious brain sends a warning signal to the nervous system, thus producing physical sensations in the body (sweating, shaking, dry mouth, heart racing etc.). A single thought is all it takes for your body to become as physiologically aroused as if it were actually happening. No wonder they feel highly anxious and want to get off the plane!

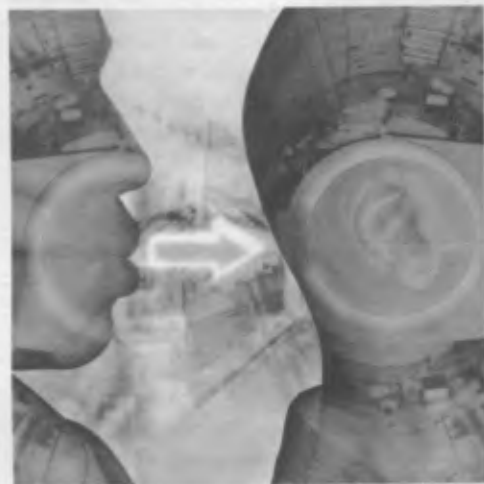
Researchers in various disciplines have therefore realised that this visual part of the brain has a very significant function. Because of its significance, it is used positively in NLP to make important, permanent changes in the whole system of the mind and body.

If we think again of the person with the phobia for flying – there is a connection between planes, crashing, and fear and anxiety in their brain. These connections are made in the brain by millions of little neurons, which, when connected, form a chain, or a neural network in scientific terms. These neural networks are connected with chemicals such as adrenaline and endorphins, which send signals to the nervous system which produces the physiological sensations for fear, originally designed by the body for escape and survival.

It is important to recognise that these networks, once formed, connect together again and again. Each time they connect, they are reinforced and form a pattern, for example a repetitive behaviour (e.g. smoking), or a repetitive thought (e.g. this plane is going to crash). The connection gets stronger →

each time the pattern is repeated (e.g. each time the person lights a cigarette or gets on a plane).

How the neurons decide which chemical to use to connect its network, depends on which one is 'hanging around' at the time. It depends on our emotional state which chemicals will be present at the time. For example, if we are happy, our brain produces a lot of serotonin (the 'happy' chemical), therefore the neural network connects with serotonin, and the brain produces even more, and so on. This is wonderful for the happy person! You can imagine the implications of this in reverse though (e.g. the person who suffers with depression). It's also important to recognise that these networks connect and reconnect again without us having any control at all, and without us even being aware (e.g. having to consciously think about it). They happen entirely in the unaware, unconscious part of the brain.



Of course, this unconscious part of the brain is important in regulating major functions in our nervous system such as our heartbeat, our breathing, our eyes blinking and our body healing from an injury. We would not consciously be able to think about these things – it would take up too much time! We also do not need to when we can trust our unconscious to do it for us. Just take a moment to think about this. If our unconscious brain controls so much without us even thinking or asking it to do anything, just imagine what we could achieve if we did communicate with it and ask it to do something! This is exactly what NLP is designed to do.

Also, consider that if all of this happens unconsciously, so does your immune system's response to an allergen, say pollen for example. This is also the case with your brain's phobic reaction to a spider or anxious reaction to an exam or a job interview. Ninety per cent of your thoughts, feelings, attitudes, responses and behaviours, beliefs and memories are controlled by this unconscious part of your brain. As these affect you mentally and physically, and pretty much control everything you do every day and in life, it is exceptionally important that you have some control over these critical internal functions.

These beliefs, responses and behaviours are in many cases set up at a time in our lives when we were too young (often as children), or at another time when we cannot control it, or when we don't have the resources or knowledge to do any differently. This is true of physical responses as well. Your brain and

body thought they were doing the best for your protection at the time the response was 'set up'. Therefore, the same patterns will keep on repeating themselves again and again, and all the information we take in from the world will simply reinforce it. The neural networks will reconnect and become stronger, until something happens or we do something purposeful to change it ourselves. For example, we might consider ourselves a shy person, so we force ourselves to take a trip around the world on our own to build our confidence. However, it is not

always possible to do this as we don't always know what to do or how to do it, or we have various 'limitations' that stop us from doing anything at all.

This is where NLP is so important. It is the development of understanding how someone takes in the world through the senses, and uniquely stores, codes and organises this information. Then, by using specially developed language patterns and processes, we can 'talk' to the brain in a language it fully understands, communicating fully with it, asking it to respond to things differently, in a way that suits us better and serves us fully.

It is important to point out that because NLP processes are so specific and direct, they have very powerful effects and positive change is often instantaneous. People therefore could have an idea of a NLP practitioner 'waving a magic wand' and solving all their problems for them. This is not the case at all. It is not NLP that works by itself, it is you and your brain that work! Remember one of the key assumptions of NLP – we are simply reminding the brain of its inherent excellence. It already has everything it needs (the 'hardware') and all we are doing as a NLP practitioner and client is working together, and gently guiding your brain in the right direction (reprogramming the 'software'). By doing this, we connect those neural network patterns inside your brain to do what we want them to do, not what they thought they had to do all that time ago when they were first connected.

Einstein is quoted as saying, "Our thinking creates problems that the same kind of thinking cannot solve." I think this is a good way of describing how NLP works. If it was just as easy as saying consciously, "I'd like to change this behaviour now, please", everyone would be their own therapist and would be completely fulfilled and happy and healthy in life. The only difference between you and me is that I know how to communicate with the type of thinking that can change you positively.

Mental and physical diseases such as depression or allergies are just a way of thinking (e.g. a neural network pattern in the brain), and can be changed if you really want them to be. So the next question is what can NLP help me with? It is important to remember before you read the following, that the lists here are given as examples only. Remember you are completely individual and you may have your own unique problem you would like help with:

*NLP can help overcome physical health problems, for example:*

- Musculoskeletal problems
- Allergies and autoimmune responses
- Skin disorders
- Illness
- Pain and scars
- Headaches/migraines
- Weight loss/weight gain/eating disorders
- Strengthen immune system

NLP can help achieve personal excellence and well-being, for example:

- Banish old limiting beliefs (e.g. insecurity, self-doubt etc.)
- Learn to love yourself
- Build self-confidence and self-esteem
- Increase confidence in all areas of life
- Identify and achieve future goals for life
- Deal with stress effectively
- Have fulfilling, loving relationships
- Integrate conflicting parts of yourself
- Recover from trauma (major or minor)
- Resolve emotional challenges
- Motivate yourself
- Believe in yourself and your capabilities
- Feel differently about home, school, college, work etc.

NLP can help change your behaviour so it suits you better, for example:

- Depression
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Anxiety and panic (including panic attacks)
- Phobias
- Addictions
- Smoking/drinking/drug taking
- Excessive shopping

Charlotte Hinksman has an honours degree in psychology and experience in consultancy in varied psychological settings. She has completed her Master NLP Practitioner training, the highest level training for NLP consulting. She has undergone intensive training and invested a great deal of time researching many articles and books written by the founders of NLP and experts in other fields, as well as from other experienced Master practitioners and trainers of NLP. She works independently in private practice as a neuro-linguistic practitioner, at Level 2, 136 The Terrace, Wellington, New Zealand. She can be contacted at: ph: +64 21 701 138 or +64 4 499 1192.

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- Over- or undereating
- Any other repeated behaviour that you find on the whole unsatisfying

## NLP can help achieve peak sports performance

- Access peak states before each sporting event
- Learn useful strategies to achieve your best
- Deal with anxiety and nerves
- Set and achieve goals
- Heal faster from injury
- Learn and practise 'attitude determines altitude'

## What happens in a session?

Together with your NLP practitioner you will discover your issue and then by identifying your goals, find out what you want instead. The number of sessions (one to six sessions) necessary varies from individual to individual. Your practitioner then communicate with the brain through the specially developed language patterns and processes, and change what it can do (e.g. your responses and behaviours), thus achieving the desired powerful and permanent result in the whole system of mind and body, in just the way you wanted. ✍

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