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Positive Experiences with NLP Part 2 of 6

with Charlotte Hinksman, Certified Master Practitioner and Life Coach of NLP

Overcoming Phobias

I am a certified master practitioner and life coach of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). NLP is a therapy which uses the brain's natural processes to make powerful changes in the way we think, feel and behave. This article is the second in a six month series, where these changes will be considered within six different contexts. This second article will look at using NLP to overcome phobias.

Case study *Denise*

Denise Howland (from Wellington) came to see me with a fear of flying. Denise had developed this fear 40 years ago and experienced severe panic symptoms when just thinking about getting on a plane – her throat and chest would tighten up, she would clench her fists and her heart would thump loudly and wildly in her chest. If she did force herself to get on a short flight or ferry ride (domestic or Australia at a push), she would have to take tranquillisers, and, not being able to talk about or plan the trip, she would haphazardly pack the day before. For the first day of her holiday she would be drained of energy, unable to do anything, and only enjoyed a brief respite before she began panicking about the flight home again.

This started for Denise when she first got on a plane in 1976 and had a panic attack which was so severe she had to use the oxygen mask.

What is a 'phobia'?

A phobia as defined by the DSM-IV is an intense and persistent fear of certain stimulus or activities, things, animals or people with a strong desire to avoid the stimulus and if this is not possible, anxiety and fear is experienced, sometimes to the detriment of the person's everyday life.

There are three categories

Social Phobia – Fear involving people, places or situations.

Specific Phobias – Fear of a specific trigger such as snakes, spiders, balloons etc.

Agoraphobia – A fear of leaving *safe* areas such as one's home, which can be triggered by one or more Specific Phobia.

There are plenty of official and inventive names for phobias in traditional psychology: Ornithophobic – fear of birds; Comicsphobic – fear of comic books; Ranidaphobic – fear of frogs ... I could go on.

The NLP approach

You can give these fears a fancy name and a special categorisation in the official DSM-IV all you like, yet how a phobia is generated in your brain and body, is exactly the same whether it's your common fear of flying or the more unusual fear of frogs.

NLP remembers that your mind and your body are one system with a constant stream of communication moving within your Central Nervous System (CNS) at any given moment. Therefore, a phobic reaction to a certain stimulus is NOT a static thing that you *have* – it is a process that occurs as a result of how the brain is processing that particular stimulus. And this can be changed, quickly.

This process is started by one of two ways:

1. The person comes into contact with the stimulus (let's say a spider) and for some reason (known or unknown) a fear response is triggered in the body; their heart starts pumping, adrenaline is released, they panic or freak out.

Now their brain has successfully associated fear with spiders – we now have a clear connection in their CNS with a specific trigger. Next time they think about the spiders or see one, the fear will automatically get triggered. The fear can strengthen over time.

2. The person is in a situation, and for some reason (known or unknown) the person is distressed by something or they have a panic attack. When they think back to this, they may feel embarrassed or humiliated by it. Their brain then associates the panic and the embarrassment to the situation. They then avoid that situation because they are afraid of being afraid again. Each time they remember the situation, they remember the horrible feelings, and seek to avoid repeating them.

Sometimes the brain gets so good at generating fear and attaching it to certain triggers, the person feels afraid or anxious most of the time (this is known in psychology as generalised anxiety).

Your brain is doing what it's designed to do – to keep you safe. Our ancestors were hunters and gatherers and for them the **flight or fight** response was for survival. If they came into contact with something life-threatening, such as a tiger, the body would go into flight or fight response which involved adrenaline and a closing off of the digestive system – so they had the energy to either fight the thing or get away quickly. The brain remembers the tiger and the fear so that next time, they can react quickly and survive. It wants to protect you from potential harm in the future.

Although these kinds of danger are not so relevant now, your brain still has the innate protective response and can do it too much and too often, being overprotective – hence the fear reaction to many different (some weird and wonderful) stimuli that we call phobias.

What's possible with NLP?

NLP co-developer Richard Bandler learnt from people who had overcome phobias naturally. He discovered they made a very definite shift in how they remembered the event or the stimulus, and their nervous system made the emotional

adjustments accordingly. They found a way of re-coding memories from the red alert place in the brain, to the neutral out of danger place, where the nervous system could relax. He carefully modelled these mental strategies, and refined it into a specific NLP process, which we now use to teach other brains how to overcome phobias. The process itself takes about 30 minutes and is used in the context of a therapeutic session/s.

It seems surprising that we can teach someone's brain to overcome a phobia so quickly. Some people spend their whole lives in trauma or phobia because of just one unfortunate event. It takes the brain about 30 seconds to form a phobia to an event or stimulus, so taking up to one hour to reverse it is realistic.

For our case study *Denise*

Since our work last year, she has been flying to Auckland and back to visit family regularly, she flew to Australia for a wedding and she is planning a tour around the South Island for her 60th birthday which includes a helicopter ride over Franz Joseph Glacier! There's also a trip planned to France next year with her supportive husband Rick, who, although delighted with results, often jokes about reversing it so they can cut back on travel expenses! Joking aside, Denise is so excited about her new freedom. She can plan her trips, pack accordingly and actually look forward to stepping off the plane. She even describes now being slightly bored on flights – a far cry from the overriding panic and fear. She says, "The biggest eye-opener for me would be that after 40 years of fear of flying, with your help and support, it was painless and felt almost easy. I just kept thinking why didn't I do this sooner?"

Denise is just one of many who used NLP to overcome her phobia. There is no need to live in irrational fear given what we know about the brain and the technology and tools we have for rapid change. Phobias limit your choices in life, and overcoming them will open up choices you never knew you had. ☺



Denise at airport

About Charlotte

Charlotte Hinksman is a certified master practitioner and life coach of NLP. She has a private practice in central Wellington. More information can be found at her website: www.charlottehinksman.com or at: www.nzanp.org.nz



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