

NLP

'Following your dreams' and reaching your full potential can at times seem impossible. However, a qualified practitioner will often use a specialist technique to help guide you to realise that the only thing holding you back in life, is yourself. This technique is NLP (neuro-linguistic programming).

"Neuro" meaning nerve, refers to the way we gather information from the outside world, using our five senses. "Linguistic" is the study of language. This refers to the way we make sense of that information by organising it into the structure of language. Finally, "programming" is our way of controlling something. This refers to how we interpret the world and how we control our daily actions, choices and behaviours.

What is NLP?

Maybe you've never been given the opportunity, or your responsibilities are holding you back from reaching your goals. While a daily routine and habit can be difficult to break out of, the excuses you tell yourself are not what is stopping you from making these achievements.

NLP practitioners harness the power of language to break down the mental barriers we unknowingly create for ourselves. Because of this, NLP is considered to be one of the most useful and accessible tools to come from modern psychology. NLP is used to assist the development of:

- stress management
- improving feelings of empathy
- improving communication skills
- resolving destructive relationship patterns.

NLP is used to teach us how changing the way we perceive the world can lead us to adjust and adapt our behaviours in order to live the life we dream of. An NLP coach will work to encourage the client to move out of their comfort zones. Breaking barriers and taking chances only helps to develop a fuller, happier and infinitely more satisfying life.

Understanding NLP

The technique was developed in 1972 by John Grinder and Richard Bandler. Fascinated with human excellence, they decided to look at the work of Fritz Perls, the psychotherapist behind gestalt therapy, Virginia Satir, the "mother of family therapy" and Milton Erickson, the first therapist to use hypnosis for medical purposes.

While NLP is a vast and complex technique, the fundamental ideas behind the subject can be broken down into three parts:

1. **Subjectivity** – At the heart of NLP lies the understanding that each one of us has a unique perspective of the world we live in.
2. **Maps** – The belief that our own worlds are made up of complex territories and boundaries that are drawn out for us as we grow.
3. **Language** – It is understood that we have the power to shift and redraw these boundaries using our 'control systems'. The most influential control system we hold is language.

NLP and subjectivity

To put it simply, imagine the following situation: two people have been made redundant. Due to a lack of work available in either of their current locations, both have been forced to move out of the area for new opportunities.

Person A is initially upset by the unexpected loss, but has become accustomed to the idea. They make the most of the free time by searching for a new home and going out to meet a new social circle. The new job is less money, but the area is cheaper so there is money leftover for luxuries. After thinking about the situation, person A has managed to turn the potential confidence blow and source of anxiety into a positive, new experience.

Person B however, is not doing well. The redundancy was a blow to their self-esteem and feels like the new, lower grade job is a sign of failure. This loss of self-confidence and self-worth has caused distraction and soon enough it is time to make the big move. Only person B was dwelling on the sadness for too long and was forced to make a quick decision on a home much smaller than originally planned. Person B feels lonely and angry at the situation he has been put in.

The moral of this story is that, regardless of what happens to a person during his or her life, it is the way they look at the situation that affects the experience. But is it really that easy, to change your perspective on the world? What determines how we see our lives?

NLP maps

NLP maps (also known as models) are the next component behind the technique. The idea is that each of us have a unique map marking out the journey of our lives.

NLP practitioners use the idea of a map to illustrate how we can only view our own representations of the world, not the world itself. Think of it as though we are all wearing goggles that only show certain parts of the world. Even if two people are standing side by side, witnessing the same event, both will come out with a different experience. Whether we are aware of it or not, every event in our lives impacts our future in some way. This may be our beliefs, behaviours or the decisions we make, but each one will make a mark on our future.

This understanding is fundamental to NLP. A practitioner will use NLP to understand how and why clients back themselves into a corner or "get stuck in a rut". Some may feel restricted, as though they lack the skill or worth to reach their goals. While this may not be their choice, it may be a result of something that happened in the past. A harsh rejection, a personal loss or perhaps public embarrassment may have left a mark on their map, preventing them from pushing forward in the future.

Language and NLP

The final theory behind NLP coaching is that it is down to the person to push the boundaries of our maps by 'reprogramming our internal control systems'. Language gives us the ability to formulate, express and communicate our thoughts. It structures our world and the meaning and associations of words not only describe, but shape the world around us.

By altering their use of language, a person can expand the limits of their maps and take the first steps to starting the changes they want to make. For example, think of the word 'failure' – what does this mean to you?

To some, the word may represent disappointment, sadness and the sinking sensation in the stomach. These associations may alter how they will react to a failure - or risk of failure - in the future. However, others may associate the word with new beginnings, a fresh start and another life experience.

By altering the way different words and associations shape a person's network of vocabularies, they can begin to change the way they think and their perception of the world.

Life coaching and NLP

People communicate feelings in different ways. Most of these feelings are actually communicated unconsciously, be it through tone, volume, pace, facial expressions, body language and words. NLP practitioners are trained to recognise these subtle, unconscious clues so that they can understand how their client is feeling. A practitioner can identify the self-imposed restrictions the clients have put on themselves through unveiling the client's mental map and working with them to move forward.

The three most common types of limiting beliefs/self-imposed restrictions include:

- hopelessness
- worthlessness
- helplessness.

It is easy for people to set themselves up for failure if they are constantly thinking negative thoughts. Comments such as, "I'm not good enough", or "other people are better than me" can limit an experience and the chance of accomplishment. It is common for an NLP practitioner to cover these negative beliefs by asking a series of questions.

- Why do you believe you do not deserve happiness or success?
- Why can't you succeed?
- What is preventing you from fulfilling your dreams?

The answers to these questions can help to reveal the feelings that are causing the limiting beliefs. An NLP coach will then begin to explore and challenge the limitations with the hope of changing the client's negative thoughts.

What to expect

While the methods used by professionals will all differ, the standard NLP coaching session will follow the same, basic pattern.

Initially, the practitioner will ask what you want to change and the problems you want to overcome. They will pay close attention to what you are saying, how you say it and tailor the session to your responses.

The NLP coach will then work through a range of exercises with you in order to piece together your "life map". They will begin to introduce new thought processes in order to help you widen your boundaries.

It is common for the practitioner to give you a number of exercises to practise at home. This will help you get accustomed to the techniques learnt in the NLP coaching session. While the main neurological changes will have occurred during the session, they may take time to settle in. It is normal for the changes to progress over time, as you get back into your daily routine.

They may ask you to record how you felt before, during and after sessions. This is so you and the NLP practitioner can look back on the results. You will also make note of any changes you have noticed since starting the sessions and record any at-home exercises you have completed. When you are ready, both you and the practitioner will decide on the next stage of your life and what change to begin.

It is thought that NLP is such a popular technique because it focuses on the future. It works to explore future possibilities and solutions, rather than encouraging you to dig up past memories or experiences. NLP coaching is about adding opportunities and widening perceptions, rather than dwelling on the negatives.

How can NLP help?

Neuro-linguistic programming is often regarded as “a tool-kit for the mind”, because of this; NLP is used to improve all areas of a person’s life. It is known to be particularly effective for improving the following situations:

Anxiety and stress

NLP coaching can be an effective method for fighting feelings of stress and anxiety because it identifies the thought patterns that may be causing the pressure. As soon as these unconscious thought patterns are recognised, they can be challenged.

Health and well-being

One of the most important ideas underpinning NLP is that the mind and body are closely connected. When exercising for example, people will experience positive mental and physical energy. By improving the way we approach and think about the world, we can improve the health and well-being of our bodies.

Fears and phobias

NLP is well-known for its effectiveness in helping people cope with fears and phobias. Like with anxiety and stress, NLP can reveal the thought process behind the often ‘irrational’ fear. NLP can help to change how a person thinks and feels about what was causing them fear, so that they are no longer afraid.

Relationships

Relationships are based on communication and problems often arise when people are not communicating or expressing how they feel. NLP can help a person become more aware of how they communicate. Understanding this can help people accept that others may have different views. One opinion is not wrong or right. With NLP coaching, practitioners hope that by developing empathy skills, a person will find it easier to build strong and long-lasting relationships.

Confidence

It is common for people to see an NLP practitioner for relief from their own fears and limitations. The techniques used can help the person break the old habits and beliefs and gain new opportunities. NLP is effective in boosting an individual’s confidence by teaching them how to make decisions based on their dreams, rather than fears.

Business

NLP is an excellent tool for understanding people and their ways of communication. In terms of business, learning these tips from an NLP coach will help a person improve how they communicate and improve their ability to empathise and negotiate with colleagues, employees and managers.