NLP – a practical philosophy of being
Joanna Taylor discusses Neuro-Linguistic programming

N  euro-Linguistic Programming, or NLP, has been described as “the handbook of how to achieve what we want out of life”. It is a model that helps us understand how we think, how our use of language affects how we think and how others understand us, and how all of this affects our behaviours. It was developed in the 1970s by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, who were very curious to discover how certain therapists were achieving consistently good results with their clients.

It draws on many established areas of psychology, bringing together all the elements that work and putting them into a framework that is comprehensive, accessible and ethical. From understanding yourself, your personal relationships and your professional relationships, NLP will challenge the way you think about your world, and have a positive impact that is empowering for you and those around you.

The name is derived from: Neurology (the study of the mind and nervous system; how we think), Linguistics (the study of language and how we use it) and Programming (the sequence of our actions; how we motivate ourselves to achieve our goals). NLP is therefore the study of the structure of subjective experience or, in other words, how we use the language of the mind to consistently achieve our specific and desired outcomes. It is a practical philosophy of being.

Did they hear what you said, or what they think you meant? We’ve all had the experience of having someone say something we didn’t hear or didn’t understand. The more choices and behavioural flexibility we can have in our communication style, the more likely it is that the other person will understand what we really mean.

Understand how you can use body language to help your patients feel comfortable. We all instinctively “do” rapport with people we like, and NLP teaches us how these unconscious processes work. Through techniques such as matching and mirroring we can gain rapport with people very quickly in order to increase their feelings of comfort and security in the surgery. Using our sensory acuity, we can pay attention to what is important to us. How useful would it be if you could discover that it is not our responsibility to change somebody else’s model. Accepting this idea can have an enormous positive impact on any relationship; as the author Wayne Dyer says: “Practice being kind, not right.”

Sometimes another person’s ideas might be radically different from yours because we all have our own opinion as to what is important to us. How useful would it be if you could discover that it is not our responsibility to change somebody else’s model. Accepting this idea can have an enormous positive impact on any relationship; as the author Wayne Dyer says: “Practice being kind, not right.”

As we listen to others, noticing language patterns, body language and voice tonality, we can gain insights into how they are processing their own experiences, which can help us discover how best to make ourselves understood. If a patient is nervous, for example, they will be filtering your conversation through their belief that your practice is a scary place to be, so that any words they don’t understand may cause added anxiety (“I’ve never heard of it, therefore it’s something I need to be afraid of”). The more choices and behavioural flexibility we can have in our communication style, the more likely it is that the other person will understand what we really mean!

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As human beings, we have a tendency to believe what we see, and to see what we believe; consider – how many times in the past have you “known” something would go wrong with a particular patient, and proved yourself right? What if, instead, you “know”...
Every behaviour has a positive intention

All our actions and behaviours have at least one purpose – to achieve something that we value and that benefits us in some way. Even a behaviour which others perceive to be manifestly antisocial, such as bullying another staff member, will have a positive intention of some sort for the person doing the behaviour. NLP separates the intention behind a behaviour from the behaviour itself, and asks for what purpose is the behaviour there? For example, a person habitually to a suggestion for treatment may actually be afraid, but unable to verbalise that feeling. If we can understand how and for what purpose someone is behaving in a particular way, it is possible to work with them to assist them to change their behaviour into something more useful or desirable. We are not our behaviours; when we have a better choice of behaviour that also achieves that same overall positive intention, we will take it.

People are doing the best they can

In any given situation, we will do the best we can at the time with what resources we have available to us. How often have you said to yourself, “If I’d known back then what I know now...”? The resource of that knowledge was not available to you at that time, so whatever you did back then was done from a positive intention, with the expectation of a particular outcome, and with what resources you did have at the time. A nervous patient is doing the best they can – by their next visit, their resources may have increased because of the care and understanding they were shown on their first visit.

Your reality is yours alone

Our perception of reality is not necessarily reality; however, it is our reality – everybody has a different way of making sense of their world. We pay attention to the aspects of the world which are of interest to us and ignore others or, in the words of the Paul Simon song, “A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.” In NLP terms, we would say, “the map is not the territory”.

We carry a map in our minds of what we believe reality to be, but the real territory of our world is always far richer than our perception. Our map depends on our own internal “filters” of values, beliefs and memories, and is completely personal to us. An anxious patient, a retired dental hygienist and a CQC inspector visiting your practice will all have a completely different internal map, or perception, of your surgery as they will notice, and pay attention to, very different things.

These ideas are some of the central principles and guiding philosophies of NLP, known as the operating beliefs, or ‘presuppositions’. They are called ‘presuppositions’ because, as practitioners of the art and science of NLP, we pre-suppose them to be true and then act as if they are; effectively they are ethical and ecological principles for life. Understanding NLP, and employing these principles, will improve your communication skills and increase your success in every area of your life.