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

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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 take something we said the wrong way. The meaning of communication is the response you get from the other person; people will respond to what they think you said – which is sometimes not what you actually meant! Because we all think differently, we will perceive others’ communications in different ways. The NLP Communication Model can help us appreciate how our unconscious mind filters our experiences through our personal internal values, beliefs and memories; so that effectively we all construct our own idea of what reality means to us.

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 support that belief through action. We operate most effectively when we are in a resourceful state; utilising the philosophy of NLP can help us access our inner positive resources and operate from a “physiology and psychology of excellence”.

As human beings, we have a tendency to believe what we see, and 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 “knew” that your patient’s values are another example of respect – which is sometimes not what you actually meant! Because we all think differently, we will perceive others’ communications in different ways. The NLP Communication Model can help us appreciate how our unconscious mind filters our experiences through our personal internal values, beliefs and memories; so that effectively we all construct our own idea of what reality means to us.

As we listen, respect the patient’s “model of the world”, pay attention to what is important to them and how they are constructing their reality, we can make a real difference to the quality of our communication and develop a solid, long-term relationship which is based on respect and understanding.

We already have all the resources we need NLP has been described as “a practical philosophy of being” – hence the title of this article. We operate most effectively when we are in a resourceful state; utilising the philosophy of NLP can help us access our inner positive resources and operate from a “physiology and psychology of excellence”.

One you understand a patient’s values, it’s possible to use that knowledge to increase their motivation; for example in oral hygiene compliance

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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 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 personal suggestion 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 was doing the best they could – 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.