Neurolinguistic Programming

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Definition

Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) is a technique that shows people how to change or "reprogram" their thoughts, feelings, and actions by simple mental exercises.

Purpose

In the areas of medicine and health care, NLP can help people discover the unconscious negative thought patterns they have about their illnesses and help them to change their mental and emotional responses so that they reinforce the positive, healing process.

Precautions

In case of a serious illness, NLP should not be used by itself or to the exclusion of traditional medical remedies.

Description

Neurolinguistic programming has been called software for the brain. If we take the computer as a model, our thoughts and beliefs are regarded as software programs that, if changed, can alter behavior. This concept was developed in the mid-1970s by Richard Bandler, an information scientist, and John Grinder, a linguistics professor. After observing several highly successful individuals in the fields of linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and communications, they were able to isolate the essential qualities common to each that were responsible for their excellence and success. The essence they distilled from their observation and study became their NLP model. They named it Neurolinguistic Programming because "neuro" refers to the brain, "linguistic" relates to verbal and nonverbal expressions, and "programming" suggests habitual thought patterns. NLP was devised first to make people aware of their unconscious limiting thought and behavior patterns, and, second, to show them how they can change these automatic patterns and create new ways of thinking and feeling. These new patterns open up new choices and new behaviors that help people achieve their goals.

While NLP can be applied to nearly any type of human activity, from business to social relations, some practitioners use it exclusively to enhance the healing process.

Based on the theory that the mind and one's beliefs and emotions have a vast power over what goes on in the body, NLP seeks to assist people in changing their beliefs about their illnesses and consequently about their ability to heal. NLP proponents argue that helping people discover limiting beliefs about their conditions allows them to direct their thoughts or beliefs in a more positive manner. The redirected thought patterns allow the brain to engage the immune system. In other words, if sick people can discover their negative ideas are about their conditions, they can replace them with positive, healing thoughts that allow them to think, will, or imagine themselves back to health. NLP practitioners say that many sick people identify with their illness. Thus they would not say, "I have this condition of diabetes," but, "I am a diabetic." The disease becomes their identity. The NLP practitioner seeks to help the patient separate from these negative and false identifications. This separation allows the person to regain a balanced identity in which family, social, and work relationships and value systems, talents, and beliefs are given their appropriate value.

An NLP practitioner guides the patient in reinforcing pleasant memories while diminishing those that are upsetting or negative. In a typical technique, the practitioner instructs the patient to think of a particular experience and to imagine it as a black-and-white photo taken from afar. The patient is then instructed to monitor his or her feelings as the photograph of the same scene changes to an extreme close-up with vibrant, bold colors. This technique allows patients to recapture the positive feelings of a good event and to distance themselves from those that were unpleasant. NLP practitioners closely observe a patient's physical reaction to these mental images and thus help identify both the destructive and helpful thought patterns. One of the two main health-related techniques of NLP is reframing a past situation or event that may have left a negative imprint and have a negative effect on physical well being. Thoughts of an event such as a car crash cause muscles to tense and create discomfort. By learning to change the internal representations of the event and to relax, a crash victim can become less prone to whiplash or other muscle spasms and pain. The second major technique asks patients to visualize their bodies working in a particular, positive way. If a patient with allergies to dairy foods can project a mental motion picture of herself eating and enjoying cheese, then she can overcome her allergy by overcoming her body's inappropriate activation of the immune system against dairy products. Proponents of NLP say the technique is especially useful in teaching people to deal with phobias and undesirable habits. NLP can bring about lifestyle changes that promote health--changes in diet and exercise patterns for example. Others go as far as to claim that NLP can re-imprint the brain and thus trigger the necessary immunological responses to promote healing. Although NLP can be a form of self-care, it is necessary to begin with a practitioner experienced in healing. Not all NLP practitioners are trained in the techniques of the healing process.

Risks

NLP is a safe, non-intrusive technique or mental therapy that has no physical complications or side effects.

Normal results

NLP claims to be able to adjust people's beliefs and behavior with regard to their disease or condition and therefore to enhance their healing process.

Key Terms

Anthropology
The branch of science concerned with the origin, development, and behavior of humankind.
Immune system
The complex system within the body which resists disease-causing agents.
Imprint
To make a deep and lasting impression; to encode.
Information Science
The systematic study of methodologies used to record, classify, and retrieve knowledge.
Linguistics
The scientific study of language.
Phobia
Any abnormal, irrational fear.
Psychological
Relating to mental processes and behavior.

Further Reading

For Your Information

Books

- Andreas, Steve and Charles Faulkner, eds. *NLP: The New Technology of Achievement.* New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994.
- Burton Goldberg Group. *Alternative Medicine: The Definitive Guide.* Puyallup, WA: Future Medicine Publishing, Inc., 1993
- Linden, Anne. *Mindworks: NLP Tools for Building a Better Life.* Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1997.

Periodicals

- Gottlieb, Annie. "How to Get People to do What You Want." *McCall's.* (March 1992): 60, 62, 64, 151.
- Wolff, Bob. "Change Your Mind through the Power of Neuro-Linguistic Programming." *Muscle & Fitness.* (January 1995): 105-106, 210-215.

Organizations

- Dynamic Learning Center. P.O. Box 1112. Ben Lomond, CA 95005 (408) 336-3457.
- NLP Comprehensive. 2897 Valmont Road. Boulder, CO 80301 (303) 442-1102.