

# **The Seven Myths of NLP**

## **By Jamie Smart**

My email inbox often includes messages from people struggling with various aspects of NLP (Neuro-linguistic Programming). Reading these posts, I'm reminded of some of the (less than useful) ideas, beliefs, and free-floating balloon juice that I've come across in the course of my exploration of NLP. In the grand tradition of personal development material with the number 'seven' in the title, I give you *The Seven Myths of NLP*.

### **Myth #1 – NLP will give me total control over all aspects of my life**

No it won't; at least, not if you mean conscious control. One of the things that Bandler and Grinder (original co-developers of NLP) seem to agree on is that your unconscious mind is pretty much running the show. The idea is that your unconscious has an infinite supply of resources, potentials and wisdom (not how I would describe many of the *conscious* minds I've come across, especially my own!) Think about it: you learned to operate your limbs, to walk and to talk, long before you had any conception of controlling your life. Human beings are organic, dynamic organisms, with an amazing ability to learn and grow. Every attempt to exert rigid control leads to greater chaos. If you're not convinced yet, consider this: who is the 'I' who would be doing the controlling? Who would control that I? And how? What you *can* do with NLP is awaken your ability to influence how you respond to the world, including the thoughts you think. If you want to have more influence over your life, develop excellent rapport between your conscious and your unconscious mind, and become choiceful about the thoughts you repeatedly hold in consciousness.

### **Myth #2 - With NLP, I won't feel bad ever again**

Sorry! There are lots of NLP techniques for changing the way you feel, but sometimes bad feelings come up. The first step is to accept your feelings (Paraphrasing Fritz Perls, the homeopath Ian Watson says, "What you resist, persists, but what you accept dissolves.") Once you've accepted them, you can (if you wish) use various approaches to change them (including changing your thoughts, your physiology, breathing differently, anchoring positive states etc.) You can even use NLP to ensure that you experience more and more of the feelings you desire, more of the time, and less of the ones you don't. St Iraneus proclaimed, "Joy is the human being fully alive." For me, that means being able to feel *all* my feelings, not just the ones I have categorised as 'good'. It also means having the ability to choose how I respond when the less pleasant feelings come up. Choice is good. Feelings are just sensations in your body. So allow yourself to become aware of what you feel, then accept it, and choose what you want to happen next.

### **Myth #3 – I can use NLP to control and change other people**

Hmmm. This is a tricky one, because you *can* use NLP to massively influence other people, but I haven't seen anyone controlling them (bear in mind Myth #1 - I don't even think people can control themselves half the time). One thing you *can* do is get rapport with their unconscious mind, then influence, influence, influence. A person's unconscious mind is running the show, so the more you can

connect with their unconscious, the more you'll be able to influence them. The other thing you can do is change what you're doing. This is one of the fastest ways to get someone else to change what they're doing. Is this control? No. It's more like an unconscious invitation. They can follow or not, as they choose (unconsciously.) The same goes for embedded commands and all the other unconscious influencing behaviours, and that's great – they can be extremely powerful. Offer the invitation then watch to see how it's accepted.

#### **Myth #4 - NLP technique X didn't work for me, so either I'm broken or NLP doesn't work**

Almost everyone I know who's involved in NLP has had the experience of trying a particular technique, and not getting the response they expected. Sometimes that leads to a sense of delight with the response they did get, or of curiosity about how they could get the response they wanted. But sometimes, people will complain either that the technique just doesn't work, or that they're in some way broken. Well, those are two possibilities – let's look at some others. My first introduction to NLP was through reading a book. The book offered several different exercises to demonstrate certain points, and I tried them, with disappointing results. Because the book couldn't calibrate to me and give me real-time feedback, it was unable to tell me the following:

##### ***Calibration Counts***

Every standard NLP technique is a generalisation and is therefore *not* custom-tailored to an individual's situation. One of the key skills in NLP is being able to tailor your actions to the person or people you are dealing with (whether that's you or someone else.) This involves watching and listening for clues that will tell you what's going on for a person (i.e. calibrating to them). Once you have the perceptual skills to calibrate to them, you can tune your approaches accordingly. The amazing thing to me is that standard NLP techniques sometimes work even without calibration!

##### ***People already work perfectly***

The fact that you are reading this article means that you are able to comprehend language, probably have motor control of your limbs, and have certainly survived many of the hazards and pitfalls of life on this wonderful planet. You already work perfectly. You have approaches and strategies, both consciously and unconsciously, that help you to get the results you get in your life. You have ways that work for motivating yourself, for making decisions, for organising yourself etc (if you don't believe this, how did you motivate yourself to read this article?) These approaches all work perfectly to get you certain results (though not always the results you consciously desire). You are already really, really good at the methods that work for you. NLP techniques are, in effect, step-by-step approaches for adding to or enhancing the ones you already use. NLP can offer you attitudes and perceptual skills for achieving great results, but it's about subjective experience – you have to find ways to tailor it to your own neurology. Example: I tried for ages to use the 'see what you saw, hear what you heard, feel what you felt' technique for putting myself into a good state. I could get it to work for other people, but not for me. Why? Because I access states really fast, and by the time I went through the formal process it was too late. But if I just ask myself "What am I like when I'm [state x]", I go straight into it! You need to find the approaches that work for you. One of the great things about developing

really good calibration skills is that you can discover the approaches that people already use really well (but may not realise they use.)

### **They don't seem real for a reason**

Many NLP techniques invite you to 'picture something in your mind', or to 'see, hear and feel what you experienced at the time, as though you are really there'. The representations you make in your mind are unlikely to be as clear and vivid as the physical things you see around you, unless you're in quite an altered state. This is a good thing! It helps you make the very important distinction between 'real' and 'made-up'. This distinction is valuable in all sorts of everyday situations (E.g. crossing the road, boiling an egg, answering the phone etc).

### **There's no failure only feedback**

Whenever you do something, you get a result/response of some sort. If you try a technique and don't get the response you expected, you have still managed to get a response. If you notice the response you've managed to get and acknowledge your achievement, then *voilà* – you have feedback. Richard Bandler once said, "Feedback really is the breakfast of champions." When you notice the responses and results you get, you can make adjustments in what you are doing and generate *new* responses and results. This is how you used to learn to do things *before* you learned about the concept of failure, so that means you already know how to do this. Bandler also said, "Failure is only possible if you set yourself a time limit." You can take any NLP approach you've tried that *didn't* work for you, and do it again in a different way, or come up with a new way of getting the desired result. There are always going to be people for whom a certain NLP technique doesn't work. If you try something with someone (including yourself) and it doesn't get the desired response, do something else. By detaching from result, you can enjoy lots of flexibility about finding different ways to get the results you want.

#### *Exercise A*

Choose an NLP approach that *didn't* get you the result you wanted. Use your awareness, flexibility and ingenuity to come up with three different ways of getting the result you want, experiment with them. Allow yourself to feel a sense of delight with whatever responses you get, and a sense of curiosity about how else you might get the response you want. You'll be amazed at how quickly you can extend your range of behaviours.

### **Myth #5 - NLP is the best way to do everything**

I remember when I first learned NLP, I assumed it was the best way to do everything. This assumption closed my eyes (temporarily) to all sorts of great stuff people who didn't know NLP were doing. NLP is essentially a technology for modelling things that work. To this end, it's been used to create models of top performers in fields including therapy, persuasion, presentation skills, leadership, sports etc. These models can then be learned by others. But let's get one thing straight: there are people out there doing *amazing* stuff who haven't even heard of NLP. That's right, you heard right! There are people operating in every field who are getting great results without having learned NLP. This is great news for at least two reasons: a) there are lots of amazing skills out there still to model, so once you've learned NLP you can get out there and find out how they're doing what they're doing. b) people who are naturally brilliant in a field don't typically know how they're getting the results they're getting (they have a story about it,

but they usually don't know what they're doing at an unconscious level, because... it's unconscious!) With NLP you can find out and then feed it back to them in ways that help them to *enhance* their abilities. Hooray!

### **Myth #6 - NLP is therapy**

No it isn't. OK, I guess a slightly more in-depth response would be appropriate. The first models created in NLP were of brilliant individuals getting great results working in the field of therapy. These great therapists happened to be amazing communicators, able to get rapport with people at a deep level and then 'persuade' them (one way or another) to change. It just so happens that many of the behaviours, skills and beliefs modelled from these individuals happen to be extremely useful in many other areas of human endeavour, especially when they relate to communication, influence and change. But the various elements of NLP have also been modelled from many other areas of expertise, including leadership, sports, persuasion, public speaking, etc. The list goes on. At its heart (to paraphrase Richard Bandler) NLP is a) the attitude that anything's possible and b) the approaches used to model excellence. The term 'NLP' is also used to describe the skills, techniques and attitudes that have been modelled. Having said all this, NLP can be (and is) used for great therapeutic benefits. For example, newly-trained NLP practitioners regularly help people overcome phobias or habits in a single session, by showing them how to run their brain differently. Does this mean the practitioner is a therapist? No. Does it mean they can do really cool stuff? Yes! People get therapeutic benefit from going on holiday. But does that make the travel agent a therapist? NLP isn't therapy.

### **Myth #7 - Understanding about NLP means I can do it**

I remember when I was first learning this stuff, sitting on a train reading a book about NLP, and being irritated by the noise the people across from me were making. The irony of this suddenly struck me: here I was with my nose in a book about human beings, communication and subjective experience, annoyed at the intrusion of some real human experience into my safe little book-world.

Books, tapes and videos are great as study aids, but NLP is about experience: you cannot truly understand any element of NLP until you can do it. Period. Werner Erhard famously said, "Understanding is the booby prize." I've expanded this to "Understanding is the booby prize - experience is the Grand Prize." I'm not saying you have to attend NLP training to learn to do this stuff, but I am saying you need to get out there and put it into action before you will really appreciate how powerful NLP is. Every single day you are presented with countless opportunities to put what you learn into practice. Grab hold of those opportunities, take some risks, have some fun. There are lots of people who can talk about NLP, far fewer who can do it: make up your mind to be one of those who can.

#### *Exercise B*

Find an element of NLP that you 'understand', but that you haven't actually got round to doing yet. Promise yourself that you will put it into practice at least three times and notice what results you get. Enjoy the frisson you get from taking a chance and doing something new.

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