

Chapter 5.2 NLP Differences

This is an important and difficult question. I believe the change I made in the way I do therapy is the reason that Billy was able to recover from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). My whole thinking process is different. I spend less time listening to a client and more time asking questions, giving directives and waiting while the client closes his/her eyes, goes inside and processes the changes.

I have asked my clients who have experienced other forms of therapy to compare NLP to the other therapies.

I began with a woman with the goal of curing her numerous lifelong allergies to many pollens, foods, and aromatics like perfume. After the allergies cleared up she continued to work on other changes in her life. She now eats all the foods to which she was previously allergic. This is her response to my question.

“I have been in therapy several different times before. In therapy with you, I have made so many changes in a relatively short period of time. I feel like I am a different person. When I think back on how I used to be, the old behavior seems strange and foolish.

“In other therapies I was the victim of my past. Over and over again, I went over the terrible experiences I had with my mother and my father. This only emphasized that I was a victim. The therapy with you gives me power over those experiences, and they no longer define who I am. You can change how those experiences affect you. You can build an alternate past, which is more resourceful. The alternate past is there with the real past, but the real past doesn't control you. You have a choice about which past you want to influence you. In building an alternate past, I had experienced how much my mother, my aunt and my father could have accomplished if they had had certain resources. I realized that they didn't have those resources, so they could not have been different. They behaved the only way they knew how to behave. The only way they knew to make contact was through conflict. This softened my view of my parents, and I no longer felt a victim of my childhood. I was able to change certain beliefs that I had made in my childhood, which had limited me in various ways. For instance I used to believe that if I had success, something bad was going to follow the success. So I passed up some opportunities. My new belief is that I am talented and work hard, and success will just naturally happen.”

I asked another client how my therapy was different from prior therapies. She said, “You have a relaxed, calming demeanor. You don't just jump into things. You will ask, ‘What do you expect to get from this session?’ The first two times you did that it hit me like a bolt. My thought was that you're supposed to tell me. It gave the ownership of the therapy back to me. You apply things gently. You often use yourself as an example. Your approach makes me the change agent.”

Billy said, "You're compassionate and care about me. You want the patient to get well. Every bit of knowledge that you have, you use to help people. You have developed your own methods. I have never had anyone get to the bottom of things like you do. If you don't get to the bottom of things, you can't get to the top."

I have taken training in several forms of therapy. The mechanism of change is usually rather vague and non-specific. There is usually the presupposition that if a client has insight, s/he will change. If a client knows how the problematic state developed in childhood, change will occur. Change often doesn't occur and then there is a desire for more data and more insight or the therapist's favorite excuse, "The client is resistive to change".

NLP assumes that the client is programmed to produce the problematic state. Once the program has been elicited, then the emotions and behavior of the client make sense. The therapist's task is to devise a program that will produce the desired state. There are usually parts of the client that will resist the change. The objections are dealt with first before making a change in the program. There are usually options related to the level at which change is made. One can target a change in (1) relationships, (2) strategies or habits, (3) beliefs, or (4) identity. A change at one level usually results in changes at the lower levels. For instance a woman had the belief that the only way people would care for her was if they needed her, and she could do something for them. She changed that belief, through a process known as reprogramming, which involves creation of an alternate past. Her new belief was that she was a nice person and people would like her. Then her strategy for conducting business changed and her friends changed.

The amount and type of information requested is different. Malcolm Gladwell in the book Blink (pages 133-138) gives several examples of more information being detrimental rather than helpful. Dr. Lee Goldman developed an algorithm for evaluating patients with chest pain. His algorithm was put to the test at Cook County Hospital. In the emergency room doctors needed to evaluate patients with chest pain and decide whether to treat the person for a heart attack. Two methods were compared. The first was for the doctors to use all their laboratory data, the history and physical exam and their clinical acumen to decide. The second method was to decide on the basis of an algorithm, which considered only 4 items, (1) the electrocardiogram. (2) whether the patient has unstable angina (3) fluid in the patient's lungs and (4) systolic blood pressure below 100. Less data proved to be significantly more accurate.

Lee Goldman took a complex problem and reduced it to its simplest elements: even the most complicated of relationships and problems, he showed, have an identifiable underlying pattern. Research proved that in picking up these sorts of patterns, less is more. Overloading the decision makers with information made picking up the underlying pattern harder, not easier. To be a successful decision maker, we have to edit.

When I see a client, I am looking for patterns, and I am not particularly interested in the specific content of those patterns. For instance, a man told me that he felt guilty about a decision he made in a classroom. I found out that he had two standards of behavior that were in conflict. In other words, if he upheld one standard of behavior (which was to keep his job and support his family) then he would be violating another standard of behavior. He was between a rock and a hard place. He felt he had made the correct decision, yet he still felt guilty. Logically he had no reason to feel guilty, yet logic was not going to change his guilty feelings that he had had for over a decade. I asked him to think of another situation by which, in upholding one standard of behavior, he was violating another. He likes to be punctual and he likes to be courteous. He remembered a time he was rude to someone because he needed to get off the phone to make an appointment. I had him make two mental images. The first was the situation in the classroom when he felt guilty and the second picture in the situation on the phone when he did not feel guilty. I had him describe where he saw the images, how close, how bright, whether they were in color or black and white, whether it was a movie or a still. Once I found out the differences, I asked him to make picture #1 like Picture #2. Then, as with most procedures in NLP, I checked to see if it had worked. He no longer felt guilty.

I did not find out what he specifically did in the classroom. I did not need to know that. Getting those details may have obscured the pattern. Sometimes I listen to the details of the content because it seems to be necessary to maintain rapport with the client, not because I need the information.

Steve Andreas, who has conducted many NLP training workshops, insists the demonstrations he does be content-free. He says that the content obscures the patterns and the process of change.

Another example is that of a person who was nervous in a meeting and wanted to change that. If you're after content then you might ask, "What was discussed? How did you feel about what was being discussed? Who was there? What are your thoughts about this person? Why do you think you got nervous?"

If you are after a pattern you might ask, "Are there meetings in which you are not nervous? Then as you compare a meeting in which you got nervous, with one in which you didn't, what is the difference?" She didn't feel uncomfortable with students and she did feel nervous with other teachers or supervisors. I asked her to make an internal picture of each meeting and compare. She said the major difference was that the students were her size, and the fellow teachers and supervisors were larger than she was. She had no objections to making the mental image of the fellow students and supervisors her size. Later she reported that in subsequent meetings she was relaxed and comfortable. Another characteristic of NLP is that change can occur quite rapidly. This entire intervention took 20 minutes.