

» YOUR HEALTH

Wellbeing therapy: Ali Scott runs a Neuro Linguistic Programming therapy practice in Christchurch. Photo: KIRK HARGREAVES

Running until October 11, this year's Mental Health Awareness Week is focused on enhancing wellbeing. New Zealand Association of Neuro Linguistic Programming's ALI SCOTT introduces a set of tools, understandings and techniques that allow you to do just that.

A model of success

The principle behind Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) is one of those ideas that once you've heard of it – modelling success – you can't help thinking, "of course, it's so obvious".

Because success, even when it appears "magical", has a discernable structure which can be copied or modelled.

NLP began in California in the 1970s with the three highly successful psychotherapists, Virginia Satir, Fritz Pearls and Milton Erickson. Co-founders Richard Bandler and John Grinder spent months recording and studying the work of these therapists, learning and coding the structure of their "magical" work. This initial modelling project provided a wealth of detailed information about human thought and behaviour and the processes involved in their healing and development.

Solution-orientated, NLP provides tools for people to understand their thinking and behaviour, which can then be used to make rapid and useful changes in their lives.

Stress is a common barrier to wellbeing in these challenging times. NLP enables individuals to overcome stress patterns, as well as issues such as low motivation, depression, anxiety, poor sleep, lack of self

confidence and phobias. When people are able to change unhelpful patterns they can more easily attain wellbeing through more positive thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Here are four NLP techniques for feeling better right now:

Change your physiology/Change your emotional state

Part of feeling down is having a "down" posture and a "down" expression. American psychologists Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen found that when they were producing and recording the facial expressions for sadness and anguish they felt awful. They discovered that changing expression alone is enough to create marked changes in the autonomic nervous system. Further research had subjects split into two groups, one holding a pen between their lips and the other group with the pen between their teeth (try this at home – you can't help but smile) and then watching cartoons. You can guess which group thought the cartoons were funnier.

Our face not only expresses our emotions, it helps create them. The same applies to posture. Getting through a panic attack is made easier when you drop your shoulders. This could be called the Kia Kaha principle – stand tall, you'll feel better for it.

There is no failure, only feedback

When a baby is learning to walk does it feel a failure because it can't do it yet? Does the mother watch critically as the baby tries again and again to take that first step? And when it takes one step and then falls, does it berate itself for not taking five? Does the mother feel disappointed as she watches the baby wobbling, finding its balance and learning about gravity? Of course not. The baby is learning that learning is about getting feedback from the world around you, about what works where, and how.

Dropping the judging about success or failure and just noticing what needs adjusting saves a considerable amount of pain and, therefore, energy. For extra oomph, try appreciating what needs adjusting. "That's good to know", or "I'm glad I noticed that". Nurturing the belief that there is no failure, only feedback, and that learning is just noticing what's working and what needs adjusting can make life infinitely more comfortable. And don't be surprised when you notice how much more able you become.

Ask yourself the right questions

Einstein once remarked that if he were about to be killed and had only one hour to figure out how to save his life, he would devote the first 55 minutes of that hour searching for the right question. Once he had that question, Einstein said, finding the

answer would take only about five minutes. So what are the right questions and what have they got to do with wellbeing? In NLP, we talk about core questions, the underlying questions which guide our behaviour – questions we ask ourselves (usually habitual) in specific situations. We may or may not be conscious of asking ourselves these questions.

A Wellington secondary school teacher ran a modelling project for the Ministry of Education and found that a primary school teacher among the top 5 per cent for gaining high learning achievements for children in low-decile schools, was asking herself this core question every time she met a new pupil, "how is this child intelligent?" Another modelling project found that for successful salespeople the question was "how can I help this person?" And successful social net workers ask themselves questions such as "how many interesting people will I meet tonight?" or "what will I talk about?"

And yes, questions which are less than constructive can be replaced. Ask how or what for constructive answers. Why questions, such as "why me?" don't work. The answers are speculation.

As if you were your own best friend

We all talk to ourselves (usually silently), sometimes compassionately and sometimes less so. Because our

relationship with ourselves is the foundation on which we build all our other relationships, making this primary relationship a loving and respectful one is key. So talking to yourself as if you were your own best friend could be the start of something beautiful.

According to NLP, the brain has its own natural language system that "codes" and organises the content of our thoughts, feelings and actions. One simple technique to "re-code" your relationship with yourself is to change the tone of voice you use when you talk to yourself – using a voice tone that sounds respectful and loving. You can experiment with different tones (or even chipmunk voices) as you get used to influencing your self-talk voice. As you practise using this respectful and loving tone you will find the content of your self-talk changing. It's well nigh impossible to call yourself a bloody idiot in a gentle voice and not smile.

■ Ali Scott runs an NLP therapy practice in Christchurch. She also provides a nationwide phone coaching service. As part of Mental Health Awareness Week, she and Jan and Maree Stachel-Williamson are offering complimentary 30-minute wellness sessions. Phone 027 348 7074 (Ali), or 021 0700 132, or see nlpthrapy.org.nz