



The Learning Institute

Think Piece #3: NLP and Optimism (10-minute read)

Overview

Mental Health Snippets are free-to-use items taken from or inspired by our Foundation Degrees, and BA and BSc top-up degree study programmes.

Use them to maintain and enhance your own mental health and wellbeing, and of other adults, children and young people you know and work with.

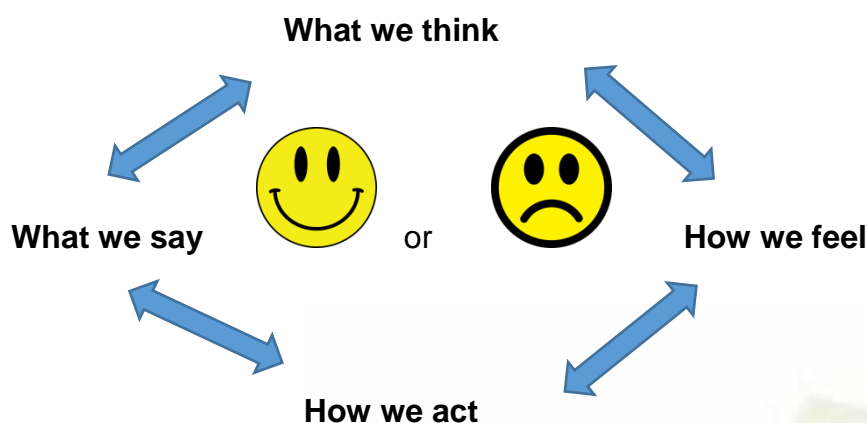


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You know how it is. You're feeling good as you bowl into work on a sunny Monday morning and the first person you meet is George. You're on autopilot and so you find yourself saying "Hi, George! How was your weekend?" and then immediately realise that you've made a mental note before [actually twenty-two times before] NEVER to ask George how he is. Ever. But it's too late because he's already started: "*Typical weekend. Really bad, could only happen to me. My hand had been playing up all week [did I tell you that? I got it stuck in the photocopier lid; freak accident, could only happen to me – remind me to tell you about it]. Anyway, on Friday night we had some seafood. I never eat seafood, but, you know, you want to please the partner, don't you, and they like it ...*" [the spring is already going out of your step] "... and then when we eventually got to A and E we had to wait **FOUR** hours ..." [Mental note #23 – '**Never** ask George how he is – he will ruin your day'] "... and then, just my luck, the doctor told me that apart from the food poisoning, I had the lowest thyroxine levels she's ever seen, and that's why I'm so tired all the time and now I've got to start taking tablets ..."

I hope there aren't too many George's in your life, because they can be very draining, and also because they are usually very unhappy people, which is a shame for them. Or maybe sometimes [like me, I admit it] you can be a bit George yourself. Anyway, here's some good news – we can use some lessons from **NLP** and from work on **Optimism** to enhance our days, and the days of those around us.

NLP stands for **Neuro-Linguistic Programming** which was devised in the 1970s by two Americans called Richard Bandler and John Grinder. **Very briefly**, **NLP** says that our thinking, speech, physiology and actions are all dependent on, and all influence, each other. Imagine it a bit like this:



Starting at the top, **NLP** says that if we are **thinking** positively, we'll tend to **feel** positive, and if we feel positive, we're likely to **act** positively, and that will be reflected in our positive **speech**. I didn't say yet why **NLP** is called **Neuro-linguistic** programming [I've been saving it for now]: it's because **NLP** says that if we change the way we talk [**linguistics**] and maintain that change, our **neurological** links will be **re-programmed**.

In other words, **if we change the way we talk, our brains will change and we will become different people, with a different attitude to life, ourselves and others.**

So if we think about George, it could well be that his rather negative way of talking may be a sign of his negative thinking. **And that negative thinking will tend to make his behaviour rather negative too. And negative talk, thought and behaviour is quite likely to impact negatively on our physiology [our health].** And, by the way, do you see the way I try to avoid George

[does he have many friends?] because **he makes me feel bad?** [I have a friend called Toyin; she could lose her last £5 note and would somehow see the bright side of it – “Ah, well. It’s only money, and worse things happen at sea don’t they!” – who would I prefer to bump into in the skin care aisle?]

A lot of our issues arise from the way that we think. **I’m absolutely NOT saying here at all that ALL of our problems come from faulty thinking, but lots do.** In fact, if we engage in a therapy like **CBT** [**Cognitive Behavioural Therapy** - I’ll do a snippet on that soon, so look out for it], most of what we will do is to learn to **change the way we think**.

It’s easy to see **NLP** in action. Next time you see someone telling off a child, watch the child’s physiology [they shrink a bit, don’t they?] Next time you see someone telling a child ‘Well done!’ you see them physically stand up taller and smile, don’t you?

Anyway, even without an understanding of **CBT**, we can use **NLP** to make positive changes in our lives, or in the lives of others. **It can be hard to change the way we think** [especially if we’ve been thinking in particular ways for a while], **but it’s quite easy to change the way we TALK.**

When I was still a teacher I might say to my class “OK, think of something that could happen that would make you feel really good. Then we’ll go round the class and you can all say what your thing is, and when we’ve done that, we’ll start some new maths [which is **really** interesting today]”. And my children would say “*I’m getting a kitten*” or “*My dad is going to teach me to drive his van*” or “*I’m going to be on a record with Rihanna*”. And after each one there would be the obligatory “*Oh, lucky!*” or “*Well done!*” or “*I want one of those, too!*” and a round of applause, and here’s the point: **It would then be next-to-impossible for any of those children NOT to be feeling positive.**

Feeling, thinking, acting, being positive. By asking them to change the way they talk.

We can break into the NLP circle anywhere we like. That’s [one of the reasons] why going to the gym or for a run can be so helpful [we can change our physiology]. But changing the way we talk can be the easiest. If I’m George and my stock response to ‘How are you?’ questions is “*Oh, you know, could be worse I suppose*”, then I’d likely do myself a lot of good by making the decision to **CHANGE** that stock response to this one: “*I’m really well, thanks!*” Because **NLP** says that if we say it enough times, we’ll start to really think it, and then **we’ll start to do it and be it** [if you follow] **because our changed linguistics will have re-programmed our neurology.** [I’ll probably find that are lot more people are interested in talking to me as well, which will bring another lot of benefits].

I haven’t written anything yet about **Optimism** [I’ve been saving it for now]. The American psychologist Martin Seligman started the ‘positive psychology’ movement back in the late 1960s, and in 1991 he published a book called ‘**Learned Optimism**’ which tells us some of the benefits of being an **Optimist** [my glass is half full, {think Toyin}]. In brief, Seligman suggests that, in comparison with **Pessimists** [my glass is half empty, {think George}] **Optimists**: get sick less often, recover more quickly when they actually are sick, have more satisfying lives, earn more money, have more friends, have more positive relationships, and, oh yes, they live longer. Seligman talks about ‘**the 3 P’s of Pessimism**’ – he says **Pessimism** is **Personal, Pervasive and Permanent.**

The second thing that Seligman suggests is that [obviously] we can **LEARN** to be **Optimists**. I've taken a bit of a creative leap in this snippet by saying that I think [and my experience tells me] that using **NLP** supports the development of **Optimism**, and **that package of two quite simple psychological practices** can beneficially transform our lives in many cases and situations.

Here are some lovely [?] examples of **Optimism** and **Pessimism** [you may need to think about them before you **realise just what is really being said here and the effect it's likely to have**].

Here's what Sir Alex Ferguson said immediately after Manchester United had been beaten at home for the first time in 23 years by Spurs: "Our keeper made an error but I'm not blaming him; he's been great for us all season. He's had an off-day. We got nothing at all from the ref all game. The boy Bale [a Spurs player who scored twice] is very good, but today he was unplayable - he could have been on his own out there against anybody and Spurs would have won". Do you see how **Optimistic** this is? **Do you see how Ferguson is telling his players that losing isn't going to happen again?** [By the way, Man Utd didn't lose another game, and went on to win the Premier League title].



Here's what Sergiy Stakhovsky said when he'd beaten Roger Federer at Wimbledon in the second round – Stakhovsky was ranked 116 at the time, and Federer was ranked 3: "I feel fantastic. That was the game of my life for sure, the game everyone hopes for. Beating Federer, at Wimbledon, amazing. It just seems like every shot I played today went in. It was magic. Magic". Do you see how **Pessimistic** this is? **Do you see how Stakhovsky is telling himself that he can't do this again?** [By the way, Stakhovsky was knocked out in the next round].

So next time you meet George, **do him and yourself a favour** and say "Hi, George. You're looking really well – love your tie!" [and then get to the coffee machine asap]. Or show him this snippet, and next time you forget Mental Note #23 and say "Hi, George! How was your weekend?" he might surprise you by replying: "Well, funny really, I got food poisoning on the Friday night and had to go A and E where they realised I've got hypothyroidism, so I've got some tablets to take and the doc says that in a week I'll have all my old energy back and I'll probably lose a few unwanted pounds! So it all turned out **really** well. My partner says I should eat more scallops!"

Things you might like to do now:

- Look online for information about **NLP** and tick the box when you've done it.
- Look online for some information on **Learned Optimism**.
- Ask yourself if your talk is **Optimistic** or **Pessimistic**, and start to change anything you need to.
- Consider using **NLP** with some people you know and see if it has positive effects.
- Show someone else this snippet, and ask them if they think **NLP** could be a useful tool for them too.

For your notes:

Want to learn more?

If you've found this item interesting, look for our other Mental Health Snippets [more are being added each week, so remember to come back soon], and also at The Learning Institute's free CPD materials. Or why not think about registering for one of our apprenticeships or degree courses? Find out more on our website:

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This mental health snippet was written by Nick Wilkins. Nick teaches on The Learning Institute Foundation Degrees, the BA (Hons) Professional Practice and the BSc (Hons) Child and Adolescent Mental Health. He is the Course Leader for the FdSc Mental Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People. Nick is a qualified NLP Practitioner.