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The Saboteur Within

The Unconscious Mind is a warehouse of hidden beliefs that govern how we live. The use of neuro linguistic programming is rising as people try to live happier lives

STEPHANIE WHITTAKER, Special to The Gazette



Paula Engels, a master practitioner of neuro linguistic programming, helped Montrealer Lee Cytrynbaum overcome a crippling tendency to worry. He was able to identify deeper beliefs that were causing anxiety and replace them with better ways of thinking. "There was a progressive build-up of negative thinking," the chef said. "Negativity was ingrained in my head."

The woman was terrified of riding on elevators. She hadn't always been. The fear simply came out of nowhere one day. Suddenly, getting to work was a nightmare: Her office was on the 40th floor of a Pennsylvania office tower. Worse, the terror started to spread. Crossing bridges began to get her heart palpitating. Desperate, she went to a clinical psychologist.

He decided to use a therapy called neuro linguistic programming to root out the cause of the phobia. It didn't take long.

"She had got some bad news one day at work about a friend who was hospitalized and might die," John Overdurf, the psychologist, said. "Her co-workers took her out to lunch to comfort her and after they got onto the elevator, it lurched and stopped for a few seconds on its way down. After this, she became phobic about riding on elevators, and the fear quickly escalated to include bridges. In her unconscious mind, she had linked her anxiety about elevators with the sadness of that day.

Overdurf got the woman to relive the day, almost in slow motion. "We slowed things down so she could remember every detail."

What NLP, as the therapy is often called, does is bring the unconscious memory and submerged beliefs into consciousness. People are taught to reconstruct an event and replace feelings of anxiety that accompany it with more positive and empowering emotions.

In the past decade, neuro linguistic programming has become increasingly mainstream and sought-after as a therapy, apace with the growth of coaching, which uses the concepts and techniques of the therapy.

Montrealers can learn about the latest developments in the field at the annual conference of the Canadian Association of NLP. It's being held here next weekend. Interactive workshops, demonstrations and presentations will illustrate how the therapy applies to business, education and human development.

Overdurf, a celebrated American practitioner and trainer of the therapy, will be the keynote speaker. About 100 practitioners from across Canada are expected to attend.

Neuro linguistic programming was created in the early 1970s by American academics John Grinder and Richard Bandler, one a linguist, the other in the information processing field.

It is a synthesis of three psychotherapeutic models: Fritz Perls's Gestalt therapy, Virginia Satir's Family Systems Therapy and the Clinical Hypnosis Therapy of Milton Erickson. (More about those in the story at right.)

"Grinder and Bandler wanted to know what excellent people were doing to be excellent," Overdurf said.

"The idea was that their practices could be adopted by others to shorten their learning curves. But they stumbled onto the clinical hypnosis therapy of Milton Erickson and thought it was an interesting way to do therapy. Before NLP even had a name, the two founders were starting to see it as a therapeutic tool. And it was being transferred to management and education. Now, it really is close to being a therapeutic model."

There are no statistics on the number of NLP practitioners in Canada, but the Canadian Association of NLP has 125 members, 50 of them in Quebec. The therapy is widely used in Europe, but its adoption as a therapeutic tool has been slower in North America.

"I think some people think it's too good to be true," Paula Engels, a Westmount NLP master practitioner, says. "It's too fast and too painless. That's what people tell me before they have NLP. Then after they've had it, they say: 'This stuff works.' It makes them feel that they have more control over their thoughts."

Engels said neuro linguistic programming can be viewed as coaching, psychotherapy or a workplace development tool. It helps people change the patterns of their thoughts, emotions and behaviours by integrating the unconscious mind with the conscious mind, she said.

Most of what goes on in the brain happens at the unconscious level. People harbour beliefs in the dark recesses of the unconscious brain that affect behaviours and emotions at the conscious level. NLP, says Engels, is a form of communication that allows people to bring into the daylight the deep, internal dialogue and beliefs that exist beneath the surface of their conscious minds.

"If you have patterns of thought that lead you to places that don't feel good or don't give you the results you want, NLP can interrupt those patterns," Engels said. "It goes into the unconscious level and releases you so that on a conscious level, you can focus on the things that make you feel better. It gets to the root of the belief that keeps you stuck."

Ariel Garten, a Toronto psychotherapist and neuroscientist who will do a presentation at the conference about the neuroscience of NLP, said traditional psychotherapy gets you in touch with yourself so you can find your beliefs. "NLP gets in touch with those beliefs and replaces them with more functional beliefs."

Garten has integrated NLP into her practice and she's found that it has enabled her to help her clients mend faster. She says resistance to the therapy by the psychotherapeutic community comes from a lack of scientific proof. "But that's throwing out the baby with the bathwater. It still creates a powerful change."

Not all practitioners of neuro linguistic therapy have Garten's credentials. Anyone can train in the therapy.

It is Anthony Robbins, the high-profile transformational coach and the best-selling author who is credited with popularizing NLP. Robbins's books include *Unlimited Power - The New Science of Personal Achievement* (Free Press, 1997) and *Awaken the Giant Within* (Free Press, 1992).

One of the people in the audience at one of Robbins's workshops 20 years ago was Engels.

She was fascinated to see how easily Robbins, a riveting speaker, was able to motivate people using neuro linguistic programming.

She began taking courses with trainer Tad James in Vancouver, Hawaii and California and with other master trainers, including Overdurf.

She now has a raft of clients who consult her about everything from improving their relationships and losing weight to overcoming phobias, quitting smoking and bolstering their effectiveness in business.

One man turned to her for help with road rage. "No one would drive with him," Engels said. "He was the kind of driver would get so angry that if another driver slighted him, he'd slam on the brakes and jump out of the car for a fight."

She used something called "timeline therapy," which placed the man in a light trance state, allowing him to dredge up the root of his anger from his unconscious brain. What was it? Doesn't matter.

"The cause of the anger is irrelevant," Engels said. "What's important is helping the person to release it. And that release changes your life."

The man called her a couple of months later. "Someone had cut him off on the road, causing him to swerve right off the road. But he forgot to get angry and it wasn't until he'd driven a couple of blocks that he realized he hadn't got angry."

In neuro linguistic programming, the practitioner is looking for facial clues that hint at unconscious thoughts, said Overdurf, a master certified trainer of NLP who began his career as a psychotherapist in the late 1970s.

"People react differently to events, based on their filters, values, beliefs, physiology and history.

"That's why if two children at a beach run into the surf and they both get knocked down by a wave, one will be exhilarated while the other runs back to the beach, upset."

Because so many beliefs and values are embedded in our unconscious, he said, we may not understand our feelings about and reactions to certain stimuli.

Example: "Let's say I have a client with anxiety about public speaking," Overdurf said. "He hates speaking to groups but doesn't know why. He doesn't realize that on one occasion when he was speaking to his sales group, one of the company's senior officers was in the audience and while he was speaking, the person turned his head away."

That small gesture is recorded by the speaker's unconscious mind and the next time he has to speak publicly, he feels anxious.

"He doesn't know where the fear is coming from because he's not consciously aware. But depending on his history, he's going to recall all sorts of other negative experiences he's had while speaking in public. I get him to revivify the memory of the event. If he's describing it in the present tense, he'll react physiologically and feel anxious. If I see his eyes move up to the right, I know he's constructing a picture. If the eyes go left, he's accessing a memory. My job is to slow down the process to discover what the unconscious trigger is. I ask him what he's seeing."

And, said Overdurf, "you don't have to go a long way back to dig up the problem. When he sees the boss turn away, he starts to stutter and then the audience really does turn away and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy."

Overdurf began using NLP when the practice was relatively new. "I was educated in behavioural psychotherapy and in 1979 was working in a mental-health clinic. I used to get decent results, but I began to ask myself if I would have consulted someone like me for therapy, and I didn't think I would have. I was wondering if there was a better way to help than what I was offering people."

When he heard about NLP, he trained in it and found he was able to help his clients faster. "I was able to get results with some very challenging populations, including people who were mentally ill and had abuse issues. Other therapists would send me their clients and then those therapists began coming to me to get trained in it."

Practitioners go through three levels of training, with a minimum of 120 hours for a basic certification. A high-level certification requires completion of a 1,200-hour program.

"Most people who do NLP training are also trained as doctors and psychologists," said Jean-Stephen Gendron, the president of the Canadian Association of NLP.

Gendron, who has a background in social psychology, said NLP can boost effectiveness at work "because people often are unaware of the internal resources they have that enable them to improve the way they work."

Lee Cytrynbaum used the therapy to overcome a crippling tendency to worry.

The Montrealer had trained in New York as a chef and works as a caterer. "But I was having trouble getting things done," he said. "I was thinking all the time and I couldn't sleep. I was depressed and anxious."

He had undergone psychotherapy, but he remained a perfectionist, and would get unduly anxious. "I've cooked lamb many times but every time I cook it, I worry about how it'll turn out," Cytrynbaum said.

Neuro linguistic programming came on the advice of a friend. "It gave me the ability to look at myself and realize what I don't want to think about. Negativity was ingrained in my head. There was a progressive build-up of negative thinking. But I've come to see different ways of thinking."

Engels worked with him, and explained that anything learned and stored in the unconscious brain can be unlearned.

And so Cytrynbaum finally unlearned how to fret about everything from cooking and driving a car to queuing at an airport. "NLP has shifted things that bothered me before," he said. "I've been able to replace my negative thoughts with positive ones. I've started to feel better and I realize that life can be enjoyable."

And conscious.

The 19th annual conference of the Canadian Association of NLP will take place Friday through Sunday, April 13, at the Delta Hotel, 475 President Kennedy Ave. For information, check the website at www.canlp.ca.

HOW NLP WAS BORN: Researchers took cues from three psychotherapists

Where did neuro linguistic programming come from?

Academics Richard Bandler and John Grinder tapped into three streams of psychotherapy when they created neuro linguistic programming, or NLP. They were in search of what distinguished excellent people from others.

They modeled three successful psychotherapists to find the patterns of communication and behaviour that enabled them to stand out from their peers.

They studied Fritz Perls, founder of Gestalt Therapy, which focuses on healing through self-awareness. In it, people are encouraged to speak about themselves in the present tense. It enables people to stand aside from the way they normally think so they can differentiate what they feel in the present moment as opposed to how they experience psychological residue from the past.

The clinical hypnosis work of Milton Erickson also became a major component of NLP. Erickson, a 20th-century American psychotherapist, devised a form of therapy that used trance states, or hypnotherapy, to help people gain access to the contents of their unconscious minds.

Virginia Satir, who was a pioneer in family therapy in the U.S., was the third psychotherapist whose work Bandler and Grinder called upon to create neuro linguistic programming. As a therapist, Satir encouraged her colleagues to work with families rather than just individuals.

She also believed that the real problems that people deal with in their lives are not the "presenting issues themselves" but the way people handle them.

Stephanie Whittaker

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