How Do You Structure an NLP Therapy Session?

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Introduction

I was inspired to write this article as I knew that as soon as Master Practitioner training was over last January, I was going to pursue my life long dream and set myself up in private therapy practice. At the time however, I had no definitive answer to the question of ***how does an NLP consultant structure their client sessions to maximise results - especially the first session?*** which bothered me a great deal as it seemed like a very important question for anyone involved in NLP therapy. As I am - as psychoanalysts would say -very anally retentive, or - as NLPers would say - a judger, or - as I and close friends would say - ridiculously organised, it was important for me to find the answer, so I could carry out my new profession to the very best of my capabilities. I have attempted to do so by modelling three very different NLP practitioners and by putting various other pieces of information together. In a detailed exploration of these approaches[1] and in sharing my own developing approach, I hope I will help you find your own answer to that all important question.

I interviewed established NLP practitioner **Damian Peters** who operated a successful practice in Lower Hutt for many years before moving to Auckland recently. I also asked my faithful and respected guide **Dr. Bolstad**, and some of you will also remember in the back of your NLP Practitioner manuals the article entitled "The First Session in NLP Counselling" by **Bryan Royds**, who was a co-founder of Transformations but now has his own company in Wellington.

[1] It is important to point out that while I have chosen to highlight certain things in each of the different approaches, it does not necessarily mean that the particular practitioner ignores other things. For example I have said: "The practitioner importantly emphasises putting the client "at cause" of their situation", which does not necessarily mean they do not equally emphasise creating an expectation of change for example. The reader can also assume that the finer details of NLP consulting (i.e. mirroring, pacing, matching representation systems and so on) are automatically covered!

<u>Approach Number One</u>

The First Session

This approach starts by obtaining the client's personal details; name (spelling and pronunciation), address, phone number, DOB, details of any medication, how much and how long, and any problems or side effects of the medication.

The aim is to be in full rapport by now. If this is not happening yet, a general conversation is started, asking something like "so, how did you hear about us?"

The importance of talking to them about confidentiality is emphasised; that it will be maintained unless they themselves or somebody else is in danger of being harmed, when a third party will be informed.

It is explained to them that the first session is just an assessment – a chance to find out what their issues are, and what NLP is and how it works. It is begun by asking them "so, can you tell me what it is that's brought you here?"

While talking to them about their perceived issues, notes are made, and special care is taken to ask for names of family members or friends, or other people they may be talking about.

At the same time, their representational systems and eye accessing cues are noted, and lots of reflective listening is used while trying to ensure they are really committed to changing. Also, an "expectation of change" is communicated to the client in non-verbal ways, and also by explicitly saying something like "I expect we will have this sorted within 3 sessions…."

Towards the end of the consultation, the client is helped to SPECIFY an outcome. Then the practitioner will say "this is an opportunity to think about what you *really* want and next week, we'll start doing some NLP processes which make sure that happens!"

An explanation of NLP, and effectively "marketing" NLP to the client is then launched in to, so that they understand what it can do for them. This primarily involves an explanation of the conscious and unconscious minds, how we take in information through our senses, and how the unconscious mind can not tell the difference between reality and imagination. Any doubts and obvious scepticism is dealt with at this point.

In between then and the next session, the client is given a chance to think about what their goals really are, and the practitioner a chance to think about what to do with them.

Subsequent Sessions

Usually the **Trauma Cure** (extended version) is used to get closure and get rid of the root-cause of any underlying problem and is preparation for the major behaviour change.

Pre-test –two significant negative emotions the client has talked about are chosen, and they are asked to rate their significance out of 10, i.e. "when you think about that rejection now, how significantly can you feel it, out of 10?"

It is explained to the client they just need to allow themselves to be "guided through" and that effectively we are confusing the unconscious mind by using the imagination, to eliminate any negative feelings or emotions from the past. However, the process will:

- Preserve all memories
- Preserve all positive learnings
- Get rid of any negative emotions and feelings

Post test – the two emotions used in the pre-test are then rated again out of 10. Something like "just try and get some of those old feelings back?!" or "what's happened to those old feelings now?" is said.

The third session is usually a **Parts Integration** process for the underlying, major issue or behaviour change. The change in the behaviour is now expected to be permanent, because the root cause has been eliminated with the Trauma Cure. This is explained to the client.

This involves some careful pre-framing of the process and again explaining that they just need to allow themselves to be guided through, and that they may feel some bodily sensations and their hands will move without their conscious control. It is pointed out that whatever they experience, it is more beneficial to try and trust their unconscious responses, and that whatever happens will be just right for them.

This practitioner using the above formula usually expects the client will not need to return, thus a total of 3 sessions are expected with most clients, which they are told on the telephone before they come in. This is all part of building an expectation of change within a short time frame.

Analysis

This formula has been highly successful in helping the majority of clients achieve their goals. Remember that this is only a model, a formula developed from modelling one's own successes. It is therefore flexible and subject to change depending on the client's specific needs and issues, and on the practitioner themselves.

This practitioner is also very skilled at communicating their energy and enthusiasm both verbally and non-verbally to the client that NLP *will* change them in the way they want, within just a short time. This, as also stated by Richard Bolstad in his book RESOLVE, dramatically affects the likelihood that they *will* change, which is all part of importantly building that expectation of change right from the start.

The first session is mainly about getting to know the client, their relationships and their perceived issues, and is therefore quite past orientated at this point. It is also more on the perceiver side of things, and quite chunked-up with few planned or detailed questions. This allows for a lot of reflective listening and rapport building, helping the client feel at ease and understood.

It also involves a detailed explanation of, and effectively marketing NLP to the client, and what they can expect in subsequent sessions. An outcome is set at the end of the first session, and / or the client is encouraged to think of further outcomes if necessary for the following sessions. Any actual NLP "change processes" are carried out in subsequent sessions and unlikely the first session.

Approach Number Two

The First Session

Before actually booking a session in, a discussion on the phone with the client involves gauging what they want and how they expect to get it from NLP sessions.

The first face to face meeting then involves filling out detailed form; obtaining information about name, address, age and occupation, physical health and medication, any other current treatments, and their doctor's name. While obtaining this information, the practitioner concentrates on getting into rapport, allowing the client to get used to the environment, and also notes their basic metaprograms, eye accessing cues and lead and primary representational systems.

This also involves a “Contracting Checklist” which asks for the client’s commitment to some key agreements; i.e. appointment cancelling etiquette, confidentiality and privacy, and feedback.

This is all covered fairly quickly with humour and in the context of rapport, and then launching into exploring their “problem”. Their lead is followed by the practitioner with verbal pacing and gentle metamodel questions. There is also some specific information that will be asked for if not spontaneously mentioned, and is covered with the following questions:

What led to your decision to call me? Who else was involved?
(For motivation and decision making strategies)

Now you are here, what do you want? What else? What else?
(Broaden expectations of what is possible. Use Values Elicitation if not sure)

What are all these things an example of? What’s the underlying issue which, when changed, will resolve all of these things? Ask your inner mind about this.
(Use to list into Logical Levels of therapy)

How long has this gone on? When exactly does it happen? When doesn’t it happen? What have others done about it? What have you done about it?
(For a brief general overview of the patterns to their issues)

Is there a purpose for this problem? Is there a deeper reason for having it? Is there anything your unconscious mind wants you to know, or is there anything you’re not getting which if you got, would allow the problem to disappear?
(For “secondary gain” or perhaps the “real reason”)

If this were a world where everything happened to you was somehow created by you, then when did you choose to have this problem? Why?
(Explores the root cause as in Timeline Therapy™)

What emotions were present the first time it happened? What similar events have happened since then? What emotions were present then?
(For "gestalts" of emotion as in Timeline Therapy™)

Then depending on the amount of time left, the practitioner is then in a position to assess whether anything can be dealt with in that first session, and an estimate of how many sessions it may take overall.

Subsequent Sessions

The second session involves a shift to setting an outcome using the SPECIFY model, checking ecology and increasing their motivation, opening their model of the world, eliciting and loosening strategies using logical levels of therapy, and pre-testing and post-testing, with a change process in between chosen with Richard Bolstad's Personal Strengths model.

Records are kept of outcomes set, interventions made, and any questions the practitioner has for supervision and plans for the next session with the client.

Each subsequent session starts with a report on what has changed as a result of the previous session in relation to their outcome, and celebrating any successes to start the session in a resourceful state. Then an outcome is set for the session, and the normal procedure followed as before.

This practitioner also explicitly puts the client "at cause" of their issues and therefore in charge of healing it. Importantly the sessions are conducted within the framework of the metaphor of the mountaineer and the guide. The practitioner is hired as a consultant because he knows some mountaineering skills as the guide, but *they* themselves are the ones who have to use the maps and take steps to get where they want to be.

Analysis

Again this is a formula based on the practitioner's successes with their own clients, and is also given here in a very detailed format. In practise it can be abbreviated – but is designed however to avoid rushing the client into outcome-setting and change processes before the bigger picture is explored and therefore before both client and practitioner know enough. This detailed exploration at the beginning enables quicker and higher quality results overall. It also allows for good rapport building, including allowing the client to get used to their surroundings and feel comfortable and relaxed.

It is a very chunked-down, past orientated approach in the first session, taking at least an hour to explore the client's past issues in a very detailed way. It also portrays certain judger qualities with all the planned, structured questions. Any actual NLP change processes are more likely to follow in subsequent sessions.

The practitioner importantly emphasises putting the client "at cause" of their situation and therefore in charge of changing it, with the practitioner is merely playing the part of the guide. This therefore eliminates that possible trap of the practitioner in the role of magically "fixing" the client. This is an important role distinction as noted by Richard Bolstad in his article "NLP and the Rediscovery of Happiness", that by playing the role of a magician who can fix the client's problems for them, simply serves only to keep the client in the un-resourceful state they are currently in.

Apporach Number Three

The First Session

This approach always aims to set an outcome and go through an actual NLP change process in the first session with a client. The way that the practitioner structures the session to make sure that this happens is as follows:

After setting up the relationship as consultative and collaborative, the client is then asked what they would like to achieve now that they are here. Most likely, the client will then start talking about their issues (i.e. as oppose to having a nice pre-prepared list of sensory specific outcomes!). This then involves a lot of reflective listening, which aims to build rapport and give the client the sense that they are understood. While this process is happening, the practitioner is listening out for strategies and unpacking them in the normal way (i.e. listing into Logical Levels) and also re-wording them into goals. For example: "so, what you actually do is……." and "what you'd like to achieve instead is……".

In the process of this kind of unpacking, the client's major or underlying issue becomes clear. Working in the context of changing this, the normal steps in the RESOLVE and SPECIFY model are followed. When opening their model of the world, there is a lot of careful pre-framing and explaining of NLP, usually with the pointing exercise to show

how internal representations affect results. The client is then led into an NLP change process, with a pre-test and post-test as normal.

If however, the client's issue is related to physical health, detailed questioning into the duration and history of the problem is necessary. For example:

When is it there? When is it not there?
What was happening when it first appeared in emotions and life events?
How does the problem alter relationships?
What beliefs do you have about the problem?
(Open model by showing how internal representations influence the physical body i.e. pointing exercise or submodality shifts which induce a bodily reaction)
Let's pretend that you create everything that happens to you, if you knew when did you choose to have it? What's its purpose? What's it communicating to you?

And then setting an outcome and leading in to a change process as normal.

Analysis

Again, this approach is simply a formula based on this practitioner's experience and successes, and is obviously flexible and changeable depending on the client and situation. As you notice this avoids a lot of the past orientated exploration and focuses on goal setting and change. This is effectively re-framing the consultative process as solution focussed (as oppose to problem focussed) right from the beginning. By setting a well-formed outcome and leading into a change processes in the first session, again communicates the whole expectation of change within a short time to the client. So much so, it may even be that the client does not need any subsequent sessions if their core issue is addressed in this session. If they do need subsequent sessions their expectation of being able to change something quickly will already be in place.

It is also somewhat more of a perceiver approach, with less planned questions as such and more guiding the client to discover their major issue and outcome through reflective listening, unpacking and loosening strategies and language patterns. The chunk size of the information gathered depends on the client. For example, as in Richard Bolstad's "NLP and the Rediscovery of Happiness", when working with a person with "depression" where their existing thinking style is very chunked up, the practitioner would therefore aim to help them chunk down as much as possible.

Therefore the chunk style is less representative of the practitioner's personality, but more dependent of the client's situation.

The style of questioning ("so, what you actually do is…." "and what you'd like instead is…..") also gently keeps the person at cause of their situation and at cause of healing it, an important distinction of roles again, much like approach number two. Thie practitioner emphasises this further by the setting up a collaborative, consultative relationship right from the start, where the client is put in charge of their own results by agreeing to follow instructions as best as they can, and put in the work between sessions. This is cited in many of Bolstad's writings as a very important stage in the consultative process to enable real change overall.

My Approach

When I first started seeing my own clients I was using a mish-mash of all of these approaches. They all seemed to have desirable qualities that I knew were equally useful, so I tried to fit in all the past orientated exploration AND do an NLP change process in the first session. As a result I always ended up going way over time. I needed to either lower my expectations of what was achievable in the first session or extend the time to fit everything in. As I am new to the game, I did not want to leave important steps of consulting process out, and I did not like the idea of 90 minute plus sessions either! So I negotiated with myself and played around a little until I found something that worked for me.

I cut down a lot on the past orientated exploration unless it was a physical health issue and developed the following structure (which can also be seen on my Confidential Client Form attached below):

I usually start a general conversation with them to build rapport, and aim to be in FULL rapport with them by the time I start taking own their general information and explaining confidentiality, setting up a consultative relationship and so on. I go on to ask the following questions and while talking to them, note down their major metaprograms (or ask them questions about these, if the information is not obvious), eye accessing cues and lead and primary representational systems:

What led to your decision to contact me?

Now that you are here, what do you want to achieve?

I then do either one of two things, depending on how they answer the second question:

a) If they launch into talking about their issues, I listen out for strategies and help them re-word these in to outcomes, much like approach number three i.e. “so, what you’re actually doing is….” “and what you’d like to achieve instead is…..”

Or:

b) If they are already talking in goals, I pace and ask them what is stopping them from achieving that *right now*, in order to get their strategies so we can unpack them together. i.e. “OK, so you want to feel relaxed about your job…..

…so, if you were to know, what do you think is stopping you from doing that right now?”

In either case I make notes of most of the things they say at this point, while at the same time using lots of reflective listening to discover a major or underlying issue, and to communicate I understand them, all the while working on opening their model of the world. I aim to identify, unpack and loosen their strategy for a major or underlying issue in this first session, by listing into Logical Levels of Therapy – keeping them firmly at cause. When it is clear what we are aiming for I help them SPECIFY an outcome. In practice I do not usually cover all the steps in SPECIFY, just the main ones and the ones I perceive as being the most relevant to the client.

Once we establish our goal and we are excited about achieving it, I check their understanding of NLP and explain it further within the framework of achieving this outcome. To illustrate this further I give them a small “experience” of NLP. This could either be a simple process like anchoring or, more often than not, the pointing exercise. That way I have opened their model of the world regarding change, and much like the first and third approaches, they come into their next session with the expectation that change can be fun, easy and fast.

If there is time in the first session I lead into an actual change process (based on Bolstad’s Personal Strengths Model). I have found the likelihood of doing this the first session depends on how “urgent” their situation is, how clear they are about what they want and of course, time. I always give them some tasks to do and something to read about NLP at the end of our first meeting.

I start the second meeting by reminding them of their well-formed outcome to see if it still feels appropriate, check their feelings and understanding of NLP and changing themselves in this way, and then follow the normal steps of the RESOLVE model.

Each session starts with celebrating *any* small changes they have noted over the previous week; thus starting in a resourceful state, checking where they are at right now and what feels appropriate to work on today, setting a new outcome and, well, you know the rest….!

Analysis

I have effectively modelled all three approaches and drawn pieces from each. After some playing around I developed my own structure, which was also largely influenced by the regular sessions I have with my supervisor. Again it is simply a model, a formula which seems to be working for me so far, and is certainly not set in stone.

As I am a judger about some things and a perceiver about others, I believe this approach actually represents both those metaprograms, as the questions *are* planned, but with lots of flexibility as well. It is definitely more chunked up, with chunking down on relevant or specific topics or strategies. It is more solution focussed than past orientated with setting a well-formed outcome in the first session and actively demonstrating how the client can expect change to be enjoyable, quick and easy – building that all important expectation of change right from the beginning.

I have found that giving the person tasks to complete helps them stay at cause, and makes them agree to the consultative, collaborative relationship I insist on at the start (i.e. that their success depends on the work they are willing to put in, and the distinction of roles, like approaches two and three). This again eliminates the unfortunate possibility of the magic wand trap, or the redundant victim – rescuer relationship emerging. In my experience tasks which aim to change metaprograms, less than useful strategies or internal dialogue patterns accelerates the clients progress to quite a large extent overall.

In my experience as an NLP consultant so far, I have also found that in the event of the absence of FULL rapport, or keeping the client at cause, change is significantly more difficult to achieve. I therefore always fully focus on these stages in the consultation.

While practising this structure I am also very much aiming to improve my congruency with the way I communicate my energy and enthusiasm to the client that they *will* change with NLP - as in approach number one - as I believe this to be a key factor in enabling real, permanent change to take place. I encourage and welcome further comments and articles about this!

My sessions are one hour and 15 minutes long. What follows is the form I use to remind myself to do everything and a space to keep records for every session (I have a new sheet for each subsequent session). I print the whole thing out for each new client.

Confidential Client Sheet

Name: ___________________________________

Age/DOB: _________________________________

Addresses: _______________________________

Contact ph:/ Email ___________________________

Other contact/Dr: ____________________________

Health/medication: ___________________________

Other treatments: ____________________________

Fees/estimates: ______ Follow up call / feedback form OK? _____

<u>Contracting checklist</u>: **Confidentiality/except __ Appointments/fees __ Consult/ relationship__**

- Introvert/extrovert (recharge batteries?)
- Judger/perceiver (organise project?)
- Intuitor/Sensor (what is more important, detail of bigger pic?)
- Convincer strategy (demonstration?)
- Motivation direction
- Matcher / Mis-matcher
- Sort for failure / negatives %

Eye accessing cues?

Lead rep. system (eye cues?)

Primary rep. system (predicates?)

Timeline Position

- **Chunk up / chunk down**
- **Associative / disassociative**

RESOLVE

Resourceful state

Establish rapport

- Pacing
- VEGE
- Rapport skills
- Sensory system use and language
- Milton model

PACE & UTILIZE! BUILD AN EXPECTATION OF CHANGE!

First consultation questions

1) What led to your decision to contact me? Who else was involved in that decision? (*i.e. motivation / decision making strategies / relationships / other people's problems).*

2) Now you are here, what do you want? What else? What else? What else? (*broaden their expectations; "if you could change anything?") / Values Elicitation if necessary)*

3) If you were to know, what is it that has stopped you from achieving these things? *(reveals patterns / limitations / beliefs / sort list into logical levels)*

- **Reflective listen**
- **Open model of world (sleight of mouth / metamomdel)**
- **Strategies – logical levels**
- **Form outcomes**

<u>SPECIFY</u> (underlying / major issue)

Sensory specific outcome – hear / feel / see / say to self…...(just imagine)

____

____

____

Positive language – If you don't have that, what *will* you have?

____

____

Ecology – What will you lose? What will you gain?

____

____

What are you gaining now that you won't gain when you have this?

____

____

What are you losing now that you won't lose when you have this?

____

____

Is there any part of you that wouldn't like this change (ask yourself).

____

Are there any situations this wouldn't be ok to have in?

____

Choice increases – How does this outcome increase your choices?

____

Initiated by self – What do you personally need to do to achieve / maintain this?

____

First step – What is your first / subsequent steps?

____

Your resources – What (inner/outer) resources do you have to achieve this?

Open up model of the world

1) **Pretest:** Let's go back to that old problem for a minute…..when you think about it now, can you get back enough of a sense of that problem so that you'd know if it changed? (*don't proceed until yes…..if certain situations…"OK, let's go back there now!")*

2) **Elicit current strategy / Logical Levels of therapy** - Can you do it right now? I want to know exactly how to "do" this problem.

- **Situation**…when do you do it……?

- **Trigger**.. how do you know it's time to…?

- **Operation**… how did you….? what did you do to…?

- **Test** …how did you check if you had…..how did you know whether…?

- **Exit** .. how did you know that you had…..completely?

- **Disassociate** - Teach me how to do it…

- **Alter**/ **interrupt strategy** – …would it still work if?

Lead to desired outcome
- Refer to **<u>Personal Strengths Model</u>** (problem, person, practitioner)
- Change technique/s

Verify Change
- **Post test -** try and think of that old problem again….can you do it now? That's right, it's changed.

- ELICIT and FILL convincer strategy

Exit Process
- Check ecology

- **Future pace** ..Now, think of a time in the future and check how different it feels now

- **Set tasks**

<u>Session records</u>:

<u>Second session</u>:

- ***Help client remember success!:*** **So what has changed in your life, (or in your experience of that situation that was a problem)? No matter how small the changes seem at first, what *is* different?**

- Wow, that's great…how did you do that?
- So, what *else* has changed? What else? What else? What else?

- New outcome (**SPECIFY**):
    - Ecology issues?
    - Strategy?

- Change technique/s:

- Future pace:

- Tasks:

Conclusion

I hope you have gained from this article what I intended; a chance to explore (now four!) different approaches to the structure of an NLP therapy session, and in align with your own goals and metaprograms, find *your* answer to that all important question.

Charlotte Hinksman has been in independent private practice in central Wellington since January 2006. This is now a full time practice and has expanded to include business consultancy, workshops and trainings. She is now also interested in using psychology and NLP in the business market, and will consider how you structure the first business consultancy session in a later article.

Comments, feedback and questions welcomed chinksman@hotmail.com, 021 701 138.

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