

Ethical NLP

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

At a networking event last night, a stranger (who didn't know I was an NLP Master Practitioner) told us about an NLP person she'd recently met who was promising weight loss without any kind of diet or lifestyle changes.

I didn't say anything (the conversation moved swiftly on to something else) but felt my heart sink. Why do people think that making outlandish claims is a good idea? It discredits the entire NLP community. Of course, now I wish I *had* gently said something.

Weight loss is one thing but the knock-on effect when NLP professionals make casual claims around trauma and phobia work can be even more dangerous.

While NLP can be a wonderful tool which works really well for many people, we need to work ethically and ensure that not only do we not promise more than we can deliver but also that we don't further pathologise someone who's already feeling vulnerable by blaming their 'limiting beliefs' (as per one horror story I heard).

Someone else told me about a client who had attended an NLP training, become triggered during the session and, while re-traumatised, saw the trainers' sense of panic. Rather than being able to contain him, they told him that he shouldn't have chosen an issue that had the potential to be triggering (he had had no idea that the technique would take him anywhere near traumatic material) so he left feeling shamed as

well as re-traumatised.

'I've been a therapist since 1991 and coaching since 1999,' says Linda Aspey (www.coachingforleaders.co.uk). She works integratively as a coach-therapist and her broad background includes Transactional Analysis (TA), Solution-focused, psychodynamic, systemic, person-centred, Rational Behaviour Emotive Therapy (RBET) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). While not an NLP professional herself, Linda did some training in NLP a few years ago.

'It was really good and I enjoyed it,' she says. 'But yes, I remember feeling some concern when we were taught a technique that involved turning the brightness up and down. One of the things I did in my early years of counselling work was working with trauma. I worked with retail outlets where there had been armed robberies. I know NLP does work but it was being presented as a quick fix for something that was quite profoundly impacting on people at a cellular level.'

'For any personal development work, there is potential to make the vulnerability worse. Trauma can surprise people. If you asked someone, "how would you react if you had a car accident?" their answer would be different to how they might actually react. It's the guilt and shame around trauma which are harder to unpick. A box of tricks and tools can give any practitioner, whatever the discipline, a feeling of power.'

While Linda talks about that being a helpful power which people can use to assist people with shifting things, she points out that an immediate shift isn't necessarily the right thing. Things need to be processed and someone without therapeutic skills may rush to 'fix' things rather than allowing the client to sit with what's happening and to be more of an agent in their own recovery.

“While such techniques have helped some, it's fine if it doesn't work for them”



“NLP was presented as a quick fix for something that was profoundly impacting on people”

But that doesn't mean that these tools and techniques should be buried and forgotten. Linda says, 'First of all, before working one to one, know the signs of mental distress. Know what good mental health looks like. You must be able to see when someone has a mental health issue and to be aware that it's within your own competence or to refer them on. We talk about this overlap a lot within the Association of Integrative Coach-Therapist Professionals (AITCP): What is the contract you've offered? What does the person think they're getting? Ensure they never feel to blame. Where you talked about someone being told that her limiting beliefs were getting in the way, reframe. If the client wants to work with that, get permission. Contract constantly, keep asking, "Is this ok for you? If we do this, it's likely that this might happen – is that ok for you?" Keep looking at the contract. Not infantilising but checking, "Is this ok?" from an adult to adult perspective. "Is this working for you? It doesn't matter if it doesn't, it doesn't work for everyone."

'You also need to think about the context for the work. If you're coaching someone in a coffee shop, you can't be working with trauma and phobias. Similarly, working with people in a young person setting will be different. What's your supervision arrangement? This is particularly important when working with trauma as vicarious trauma can affect you. Supervision will help you be aware of potential parallel processes and the impact of the trauma on you. What's the capability of the client to take what's on offer? If you offer too much, they may feel worse for not being able to do their homework or they might fib.'

'Whilst these issues may seem quite straightforward in terms of NLP interventions, there are often underlying issues that require a more clinical approach,' says Karen Meager, NLP Master Trainer at Monkey Puzzle Training (www.monkeypuzzletraining.co.uk), UKCP Psychotherapist and NLPTCA Supervisor. 'NLP practitioners can find themselves out of their depth when working with these issues which can be detrimental for the client and crush the confidence of the practitioner.'

'In terms of best practice, I would encourage NLP practitioners working with these issues to have a qualified supervisor who can support them and I would strongly encourage them to get some clinical training in addition to their NLP skills.'

'With phobias, it's important to find out what the triggers for the phobia are,' says hypnotherapist, NLP practitioner and CBT therapist, Sharon Stiles (www.sharonstiles.co.uk). She emphasises the need to

understand what it means for this particular client. 'For instance, a flying phobia isn't necessarily a fear of being in the air. It could be a fear of confined spaces, fear of loss of control or simply related to an unpleasant event that happened whilst on a plane. I've just seen someone whose fear of flying came from being searched at the airport when she was a young child.'

'Get a supervisor and have regular supervision,' says psychotherapist and NLP Master Trainer Melody Cheal (www.gwiznlp.com). 'Be clear about your boundaries. What do you know how to handle and what are you unsure of?'

'If in doubt consult your supervisor. Make sure you have regular continuing professional development and make sure you've cleaned up your own act. If you still have major emotional issues yourself, you are not in the best place to help others.'

Melody emphasises the importance of, 'ethics and the importance of supervision. NLP is powerful and, if used without elegance, we can do more harm than good'. ■

The importance of supervision

Almost everyone I spoke to stressed the importance of supervision. Although NLP professionals aren't, at this point, required to have supervision in the same way psychotherapists and counsellors are, it's a growing trend and can help you flourish as a practitioner.

Unlike counselling and psychotherapy where you might organically meet a wonderful supervisor as part of your training, you may need to experiment with a few different styles, people and approaches. If you offer more than NLP, you'll likely want someone who can supervise your other work, too. Make sure you feel comfortable bringing your fears and mistakes to them – it's about growing and we can only do this by shining a light on things that need more attention. Pretending to be perfect helps no one.

Watch your language

In your marketing and during sessions, however tempted you may be to use positive language and embed positive states, be particularly cautious when dealing with vulnerable client populations such as those struggling with trauma and phobias. Make it clear that while such techniques have helped some people, it's perfectly fine if it doesn't work for them at this time. It's something you're trying. It shouldn't need stating but is obviously not the client's fault if they don't feel 'cured' – set up realistic expectations and ensure you are there as a supportive presence, rather than someone who could potentially make something someone's already seeking help for feel even worse.