Effectiveness of NLP in Dealing with Guilt Induced Anxiety, Depression and Stress: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This case study indicates the efficacy of NLP based intervention techniques in reducing guilt induced anxiety and depression. These techniques were used by the author for the treatment of a 24 year old female client, over a 5 weeks period. The client suffered from anxiety and depression due to guilt over her past experiences. Pre and post intervention as well as follow up evaluations were established. A significant reduction in anxiety and depression symptoms through both objective testing and subjective reporting indicated that NLP techniques are effective in treating guilt induced anxiety, depression and stress.

Keywords: NLP, Neuro Linguistic Programming, Guilt, Anxiety, Depression

Anxiety is an emotional state that is generated from a number of internal representations of potential future dangers. It has not only cognitive and subjective components but also physiological and behavioural components. In the psychiatric manual DSM-V (American

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Psychiatric Association, 2013) prolonged anxiety is described in terms of symptoms such as feeling restless, fatigued, keyed-up, irritable, suffering from muscular tension, and being unable to sleep or concentrate.

Depression is characterized by pervasive sad or depressed mood and/or the loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities. The individual must also experience at least four additional symptoms drawn from a list that includes changes in appetite or weight, sleep, and psychomotor activity; decreased energy; feelings of worthlessness or guilt; difficulty thinking, concentrating, or making decisions; or recurrent thoughts of death or suicidal ideation or suicide plans or attempts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Stress is generally defined as the body's nonspecific response or reaction to demands made on it, or to disturbing events in the environment (Rosenham & Seligman, 1989). It is a process by which we perceive and cope with environmental threats and challenges (Myers, 2005). While a certain amount of stress promotes and facilitates learning, higher levels of stress may lead to significant distress in the life and functioning of an individual.

Traditionally, the different approaches used to treat anxiety, depression and stress include pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy, either alone or in combination with each other. Studies show that even when pharmacotherapy is deemed successful, relapses are more common in pharmacotherapy alone treatment as compared to when only psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy in combination with psychotherapy is used. (Yapko, 1989, 1992). However, psychotherapy is in itself a long time consuming process with most therapies requiring 15-30 sessions.

Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) is based on the idea that there is a connection between the neurological processes (neuro), language (linguistic), and behavioural patterns learned through experience (programming). NLP models provide the basis for a therapeutic technique for detecting and reprogramming unconscious patterns of thought and behaviour in order to alter psychological

responses of the client. NLP based interventions in psychotherapy or Neuro Linguistic Psychotherapy (NLPt) is a systemic imaginative method of psychotherapy with an integrative-cognitive approach (Schuetz et al. 2001).It is a goal-orientated work with a person paying particular regard to his/her representation systems, metaphors, sub modalities and relation matrices aimed at solving their psychological problems.

NLP based techniques are gaining popularity in the field of applied psychology as well as psychotherapy. Bigley et al. (2010) used Magnetic Resonances Investigation to show that the anxiety scores 50 participants with claustrophobia significantly reduced after NLP sessions using the fast phobia cure. Wake et al. (2013) presented a reasoned and evidenced argument for the clinical effectiveness of NLP based techniques in the treatment of phobias anxiety, PTSD, depression and addictions, alongside a supported commentary of other therapeutic applications. A meta-analysis evaluating the effectiveness of NLP therapy for individuals with social/psychological problems by Zaharia et al (2015) revealed that the NLP therapy may add an overall standardized mean difference of 0.54 with a confidence interval of CI=[0.20; 0.88].

CASE REPORT

A 24 years old unmarried female presented with complaints of guilt feelings, sadness of mood, lack of concentration, feelings of worthlessness, withdrawal from social activities, fear of punishment from God, restlessness, nightmares, sleep disturbance and crying spells. The symptoms had a gradual onset over a period of three months following her feelings of guilt over sexting over Whatsapp. She started thinking "I am a sinner," "I am characterless," "My mistake is unpardonable," "What will people think when they come to know what I have done?" and "God will punish me for my sins." The thoughts would keep ruminating in her mind. These thoughts continued to keep her in a state of guilt as well as a fear of punishment. Consequently, she started remaining restless and would often have

nightmares of being punished by God. She also feared that God may even punish her by harming her family as well. She was unable to concentrate on her studies and work, started remaining aloof from family and friends and would be lost in her thoughts of guilt and fear of punishment. Her sleep and appetite had come down. She had lost 5.5 Kilograms of weight in three months. Sometimes, she would have uncontrollable crying spells. Her symptoms matched the DSM V diagnostic criteria for depression. Rorschach Inkblot Test also revealed symptoms of panic level anxiety and depression.

ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND METHODOLOGY

The client was assessed at entry to the service using a standardised assessment tool- Depression Anxiety Stress Scale 21 (DASS 21). After the establishment of treatment goals in collaboration with the client, NLP based interventions were used to achieve those goals. The interventions were carried over 5 weeks period, one session every week. After the intervention period was over, post intervention evaluations were conducted. Thereafter, a follow up evaluation after 2 weeks was done. The results of objective testing as well as subjective reporting were compared to assess the effectiveness of the NLP based interventions.

Treatment Goals

Based on the case conceptualization, the author and the client collaboratively established the following treatment goals:
1. Achieving relaxation of mind and body;
2. Releasing the fear of punishment;
3. Dealing with the fear of what people would think;
4. Releasing the feelings of guilt.

NLP Interventions Used

The author adopted an eclectic approach working with the present case rather than following a prescribed protocol. Interventions consisted of the following tools and techniques based on NLP:

Relaxation Anchoring

Anchoring involves the use of stimulus responses to alter states. Relaxation anchoring involves building resources to teach the person to relax physiologically. The author showed the client how to stop tightening muscle groups, to pay attention to the out-breath rather than the in-breath and to orient towards enjoyable internal imagery. This technique helped the client to achieve relaxation of mind as well as body. This is something she could do whenever she felt she was getting fearful or anxious.

Swish Pattern: Auditory Digital Processing

This included altering the sub modalities of the internal voice. The process involves installing a new strategy which begins with the old triggers for the unsupportive voice and has the client say a key interrupt phrase. The client reported that she got depressed by hearing an unknown voice on the left hand side, telling her that she was a sinner and that her mistake was unpardonable. The swish involved this voice fading away into the distance, as her own voice, powerful and affirming, came in telling her more rational beliefs, like, "Mistakes happen. Nobody is perfect." Repeating this swish several times during the session resulted in lowering the guilt she had attached to her mistake. On a scaling of 0 to 10, she was able to bring it down from 10 in the beginning to 3 at the end of the session.

Reframing

The frame that the client had been using was that of God as a punishing agency. This is what had been putting her into a constant fear of being punished by God. The author used the metaphor of a mother for helping the client in reframing the role of God. The positive intent of a mother punishing her child was elicited, which is to correct her children for their mistakes but not to harm them. And once the mistake has been accepted and corrected, no mother ever punishes her child for the past mistakes. Using the same analogy, the client was able to reframe her attribution of God. Her new frame included, "God does

not punish the repentant sinners." Reframing helped her in releasing her fear of being punished by God.

Neuro Hypnotic Repatterning

Neuro hypnotic repatterning is an exercise for reversing the anxiety (Bandler, 2008).The client got fearful and anxious at the thought of "what would people think when they get to know what I have done." As she felt fearful and anxious, the author asked the client to notice the direction in which the anxiety spun in her body. It was in anti-clockwise direction that she found the fear spinning. She was then made to visualize it using red arrows running in anti-clockwise direction. Then she was made to imagine taking the feeling outside of her body, turning it around, changing the arrows from red to blue, and pulling it back in so the feeling spun in clockwise direction now in her body. She was made to keep spinning the feeling faster and faster in her body till she noticed herself feeling differently. This was followed by thinking of something that made her feel really comfortable and spin this comfortable feeling as she imagined the experience going really well and working out perfectly. As she did this, she was brought to the real world, to look at what she could see in front of her in the present moment, what she could hear and all of the things in the real world that she could pay attention to. She practiced it four times during the session. With this technique, she was equipped to deal with her fear and anxiety related to what people would think of her.

Timeline Technique

This technique involves eliciting the client's timeline (Figure 1), discovering the initial sensitizing event, establishing checkpoints, calibrating positions, learning the lessons and releasing the emotion. The technique works by dealing with the unconscious rather than the conscious mind.

Figure 1: Timeline Technique
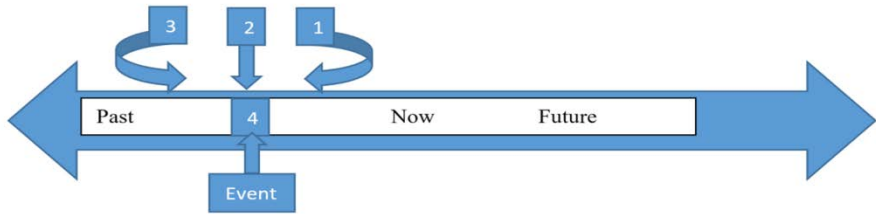
In the present case, the intervention involved asking the client to relax and draw her timeline. She was then asked to float above her timeline and move along the line into the past. When she reached the event, she should stop above it, looking down on it from above. Here, she was asked what she had learned from this event as this learning would allow her to let go of the emotions easily and effortlessly. She told she learnt the value of integrity. Thereafter she was asked to float to position 3, which was fifteen minutes before the event took place. She was then asked where the guilt was now and she found it wasn't there. Then she was asked to float down into the event (position 4) and check on whether guilt was there or not. It wasn't there. Then coming to position 1, when she was asked if the emotion was there, it wasn't there. The emotion of guilt was replaced and the learning was saved.

DISCUSSION

Comparison of subjectively reported emotional and behavioural state during pre, post intervention and follow up evaluation:

Prior to intervention, the client had complained of guilt feelings, sadness of mood, lack of concentration, feelings of worthlessness, withdrawal from social activities, fear of punishment from God, restlessness, nightmares, sleep and appetite disturbance and crying spells. Post intervention, she reported that she felt healthy, happy, cheerful, peaceful, relaxed and optimistic. During the follow up after 2 weeks, she additionally reported increased concentration in studies as well as work. Her sleep and appetite had returned to normal. She had started enjoying her interactions with family members and her friends.

Comparison of pre, post intervention and follow up evaluation scores on DASS 21 subscales:

The pre, post intervention as well as follow up evaluation scores of the client on DASS 21 subscales have been presented in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1: Pre, Post Intervention and Follow up Evaluation Scores on DASS 21 Subscales

DASS Subscales	Pre Intervention		Post Intervention		Follow up	
	Scores	Severity	Scores	Severity	Scores	Severity
Depression	36	Extremely Severe	6	Normal	6	Normal
Anxiety	32	Extremely Severe	6	Normal	6	Normal
Stress	32	Severe	6	Normal	6	Normal

As seen in the table, the comparison between pre intervention, post intervention and follow up evaluation scores reveal that there has been a tremendous improvement in the levels of depression, anxiety as well as stress in the client. While the pre intervention scores were 36, 32 and 32 on depression, anxiety and stress subscales; the post intervention as well as follow up scores were 6, 6 and 6 on depression, anxiety and stress subscales respectively. The severity category showed a shift from extremely severe to normal in case of both depression and anxiety and from severe to normal in case of stress level. The comparison has been represented graphically in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Pre, Post Intervention and Follow up Evaluation Scores on DASS 21 Subscales
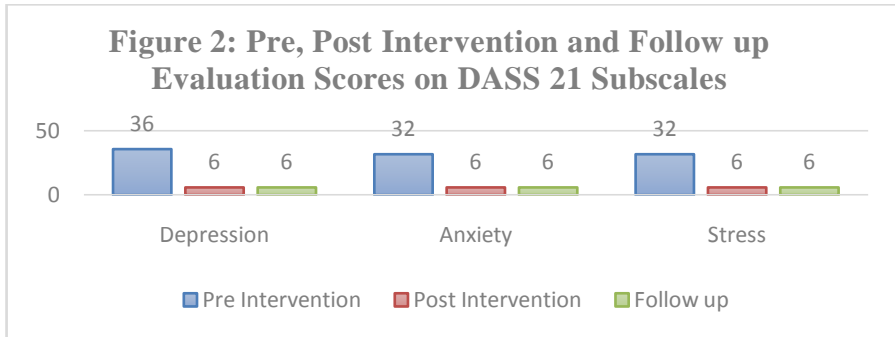
CONCLUSION

The present findings demonstrate that the NLP based techniques offer quick and effective interventions for dealing with guilt induced anxiety, depression and stress. However, the results are the consequence of a therapeutic process and not a standardised procedure. The analysis does not consider therapist effect which is known to influence outcomes. Therefore, further studies in this area are warranted.

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