

Finding Limiting Beliefs

One of the most powerful interventions in NLP is the removal of limiting beliefs. When a person has a belief that something is not possible, not appropriate for them or requires some outside input then it can be a significant obstacle to success.

To be able to remove that limiting belief and allow the person more choice in their experience is truly a gift.

But let's be clear: ALL beliefs are limiting. That is their purpose. They are generalisations about how the world works, that enable each of us to make sense of our experiences. Without any beliefs, we would struggle to make sense of life.

The thing is, some beliefs limit a person in a useful way. I have a client who holds the belief, 'I was born under a lucky star and things always turn out right for me'. What a great belief! By holding that belief, she limits herself to success in all things.

Usually, when a NLP coach talks about limiting beliefs, he or she is referring to beliefs that are obstacles to success. Most of us have this kind of limiting beliefs, and most of the time they are below conscious awareness.

You'll know when a belief is limiting you so that you can't achieve something, when you know logically that your goal is possible for you, but at a deeper level you feel incapable. It's likely that this is the result of early experiences and 'programming' when you were a child.

The belief that holds you back is likely to be quite general. Here are some examples of limiting beliefs that I've heard from my clients:

"I'm not good enough"
"I'm not smart enough"
"I'm stupid"
"I'm no good at maths/writing/conversation/presenting etc"
"I'll never earn enough money"
"You can't have it all"
"Nobody likes me"
"Nobody listens to me"
"I can't say what I really think"
And so on.

I'm sure you've got the idea.

One of the questions I'm often asked by NLP Practitioner and Master Practitioners is this: "If their limiting beliefs are outside of my client's conscious awareness, how can we find out what they are?"

Great question!

Sometimes a person will, in the course of a coaching conversation, simply open their mouth and tell you what they believe. And here's how to tell when it's really what they believe and not just some detached, intellectual observation.

When someone tells you what they REALLY believe, they will use simple words, short sentences and a tone of voice that conveys the idea that this is blindingly obvious – doesn't everyone know it?

When your coaching client does that – write down the EXACT words they say. You've just found a belief.

But what if they don't just tell you? How do you find your client's limiting beliefs?

Here's one way:

If you suspect that there is a belief getting in the way of your client doing or achieving what they want, start by asking, "What's stopping you?"

Listen out for statements that have one of two structures – either a cause-effect statement or a complex equivalence. (Complex equivalence is where an experience in the external world is labelled as an example of an internal experience or means something specific. For example, 'When you look at me like that I know you disagree with me' or 'He is rude; he shouts')

Beliefs usually have the structure of cause-effect or complex equivalence. However, sometimes the person will only actually say part of the complete belief. (Usually the least useful part in terms of removing the limiting belief.)

So when your client says something like, 'My boss doesn't like me', try asking 'Because...?' And then wait - with a raised eyebrow or similarly encouraging expression.

Often, you'll get the limiting belief coming to the surface in response to that kind of prompting. You ask, 'Because...?' and the client responds, 'Because I'm stupid' or 'Because I'm no good at presentations' or 'Because nobody likes me'

And then you're in business.

There are several NLP techniques that can be used to remove limiting beliefs. The most popular are probably the Submodalities Belief Change, the Time Line process for a Limiting Belief, the Outframing Process or a more conversational reframing process. There are also many linguistic patterns that can blow away a

limiting belief – sometimes without the client even realising it's gone.

For people who haven't experienced NLP, it can be hard to believe that it's possible to actually remove a limiting pattern from your mind. So, if you're one of those people, let me reassure you – all of these interventions rely on the cooperation of the client and will not be successful if the client does not want to remove the limiting belief. But if it's appropriate to do so, limiting beliefs can be re-programmed out of existence, leaving a clearer mind, greater confidence and no struggle to achieve what appears to be impossible.

I could go on at length about beliefs, instead I'll leave you with a quote from my friend and co-trainer Dave Udy:

"Beliefs are the weeds in the garden of your soul"

I'm a keen gardener – so if you'd like some help with your weeding, please get in touch!

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