

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and light-colored shorts, is hanging from a thick tree branch with both hands. She is smiling broadly and looking towards the camera. The background is a bright, slightly overexposed outdoor setting with more tree branches visible.

Overcoming Depression

With Neuro Linguistic Programming

As the public becomes increasingly eager to find drug-free alternatives to combating depression, **Karen Ross** explains how Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) can provide gentle, rapid and lasting relief.

When I first met Belinda she was a very unhappy woman. In her words, "I was spiralling out of control. I'd almost given up. I didn't think it was possible to change." Her health was poor, she was tired all the time, work felt like a battleground and her self-esteem was rock-bottom. One of the first things she said to me was, "Everything in my life is a challenge. I've never felt good about anything in my life." She had been taking antidepressants and seeking counselling periodically for three years. Her chiropractor referred her to me, and her journey through NLP change work began.

Massey University quotes statistics from the World Health Organisation (WHO) that over 120 million people worldwide suffer from depression. Fortunately, we are seeing more and more research being done to broaden our understanding of what helps people overcome it. A number of studies suggest that helping people learn new behaviours and how to access more positive feelings can help treat depression, including a collaborative international study under way involving Harvard University, the London Institute of Psychiatry and Massey University, and an ongoing study at The University of Texas.

Most interestingly, earlier in the year the *New Zealand Herald* reported recent findings from the University of Hull that 'anti-depressant pills ... have no "clinically significant" effect' (*New Zealand Herald*, 27 February 2008). Published in the online journal, *Public Library of Science*, the findings more specifically indicate that a significant proportion of depression sufferers demonstrate improvement with placebos as often as drugs. This suggests that people who were administered placebos made changes inside themselves without the aid of these specific medications.

In fact, we know that at least some people have stopped depression without drugs. For instance, people have been known to have near-death experiences, go on retreat, or experience some kind of shock and suddenly their depression lifts and never comes back. How could this be? For most of us the placebo effect is not new, however, the results still seem somewhat mysterious. Some useful explanations come from the field of NLP, as well as a range of techniques that mean we don't have to wait for one of these extraordinary experiences to happen, in order to learn how to let go of depression.

What is NLP?

Put simply, it is the science of how the brain works and how we get the results we get in any given moment.

Neuro – how the mind works in conjunction with the body, both consciously and unconsciously.

Linguistics – how the mind understands and uses language that then affects how we learn and experience life.

Programming – how we create patterns of behaviour, emotions and thoughts (and therefore how we can change them).



Thus, NLP allows us to understand how someone gets the result of depression and how they can create a different result (such as feeling relaxed and optimistic). Knowing how the mind works in this way suggests that depression is not something someone has, but rather something they do. What do we actually do in our brain? Usually when I ask someone this they say, "Oh, trillions of things." And it often feels like it. However, there are just six things we

do: we can create and remember pictures, sounds, feelings, smells, tastes, and we do self-talk. Our brain processes information in these six ways; through the five senses and by thinking about it in words (that's the self-talk part). So, in any given moment, whether we're listening to a beautiful piece of music or remembering a sad event, we're doing it in one or more of these six ways.

In my experience, when someone is doing depression, they will commonly be experiencing any or all of these things:

- One or a range of unresolved emotions, grief or trauma such as sadness, anger, anxiety or social phobia.
- A range of negative behaviours and thought patterns such as:
 - Making negative generalisations about their life (e.g. "My life stinks")
 - Paying attention to negative experiences (e.g. noticing when things don't go well, when people aren't positive towards them, what's difficult and/or stressful)
 - Patterns of stress which can often be long-term such as stress around work, relationships or health, or poor sleep patterns

- Not easily experiencing positive emotions. Even when they're doing something enjoyable such as spending fun time with friends, they won't actually be feeling the enjoyment in their body.

Now, any of us can experience these things and not be depressed. Our focus here is on helping individuals who have been doing these patterns for a long time, experience extreme levels of emotion or don't feel able to cope.

How do these patterns of depression happen?

It's helpful to understand that patterns of feelings and behaviours run at the unconscious level of the brain.

When you write your name on a piece of paper it is not your conscious mind that remembers how to do it. Your unconscious mind does it automatically. And, of course, you remember many more complicated things than that every day. When we learn something new, our behaviour is initially conscious, and over time it becomes unconscious (automatic). Automatic patterns can also be created almost instantly such as when someone experiences a traumatic event. Without the person consciously realising it, the brain generates an extreme response to something frightening or upsetting. Similarly, a range of negative patterns can gradually (or suddenly) sneak up on a person, resulting in them doing depression unconsciously. This explains why it often doesn't feel easy to make changes with our conscious willpower, and why it's important to be able to make changes at the unconscious level.

How does someone learn to stop doing depression?

Neuro Linguistic Programming primarily works at this unconscious level, while respectfully collaborating with the conscious mind. Techniques include using language, questioning, visualisation, gentle and deep trance. It is the structure of the techniques that allow a person to gently change the 'instructions' in the mind to transform negative patterns. For example, for someone experiencing significant levels of a particular emotion such as anxiety, Timeline Therapy (TLT) is very useful. Developed by Tad James, TLT is a gentle process that allows the client to heal emotions through guided visualisation. Healing the emotion means that they no longer experience the anxiety in such great doses. Where in the past many things may have triggered the feeling, they are now able to respond more calmly and appropriately. Likewise, in healing sadness, the person will find they will more easily feel a range of emotions that may include sadness at times when it is appropriate (e.g. when a loved one is hurt) and also happiness or calmness at other times.

Often a combination of TLT and the NLP Trauma Cure Process is used to heal traumatic events or experiences. Used to help emergency workers suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after the Lockerbie plane bombing and survivors of the Bosnian war, the Trauma technique has demonstrated immediate and lasting results. Also a gentle process, the client is not required to re-live events in any way.

Specific processes are also used to create behavioural changes at an unconscious level, while it is also important for the client to learn what they are doing (consciously) and teach them how to do something else. For instance, it's common for us to talk to ourselves, in less than helpful ways at times, and teaching clients how they are doing the 'six things' in their mind, is an important part of changing depression. Fortunately, NLP has been designed in such a way that learning new ways of thinking and behaving feels easy for the client and starts to happen quickly.



In clearing negative states we naturally uncover and rediscover positive ones. Occasionally a client will find the absence of the old feeling, and the sudden appearance of calmness and happiness, a little foreign. However, once they are reconnecting with these feelings they naturally begin reconnecting with themselves at a deeper level. Self-belief, inner peace and joy begin to return.


Belinda and I worked together for nine sessions over three months. To meet Belinda now, you would see a friendly, professional woman who enjoys her work in the health and fitness industry. She has energy, her body knows how to relax and she feels at peace inside. She naturally focuses on the 'good stuff' as she calls it; the things that make her happy. She feels the freedom of trusting and believing in herself, and living life at her own pace. She enjoys socialising and connecting with people in her life. You can find out more about Belinda's journey on my website (see below).

For anyone experiencing depression, even when it feels hopeless, there is a part of us that wants it to be different. Nurture that part of you, honour it and trust that change is possible.



Karen Ross, NLP Master Practitioner, NZCHP, BMS Hons, HRINZ, CIPD (UK). Karen has a private practice based in central Auckland providing what she has coined Transformational Coaching. As well as coaching, she specialises in advising organisations on effective performance management practices, and designs and delivers skills training in people-management and communication. She has coached and trained people from numerous countries, spanning Europe, Scandinavia, Japan and the Caribbean. For more information, visit www.freshwaysforward.co.nz and www.nzanlp.co.nz

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