

A woman with long brown hair is smiling broadly, holding two dark brown mittens covered in snow over her eyes. She is wearing a bright yellow knit beanie with a white pom-pom, a dark green double-breasted coat with light blue cuffs, and a colorful plaid scarf. The background shows a snowy mountain landscape under a cloudy sky.

# THE PURSUIT OF *Happiness*

MANY PEOPLE FIGHT THE WINTER BLUES OVER THE FESTIVE SEASON. BUT ACCORDING TO A PHENOMENON KNOWN AS NLP, THE ROAD TO CONTENTMENT IS ALL IN OUR HEADS

WRITTEN BY SARAH GARDEN





**Y**our dinner guests are stuck in traffic, you haven't even started wrapping presents, and the smell of burnt turkey is wafting through from the kitchen: Merry Christmas. While the festive season is meant to be one full of yuletide cheer and joyous celebrations, for many people it is, instead, rife with stress, loneliness and winter blues. But what if these problems were actually all in our heads?

"If you have happy thoughts, they will shine out of your face like sunbeams and you will always look lovely," wrote Roald Dahl, the British-born novelist. Though he penned this phrase in a children's book, he was actually touching on the basics of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) – an approach to personal development and psychotherapy. NLP works on the premise that the mind and body can be influenced by communication (both verbal and non-verbal). Or, in layman's terms, what we think really matters.

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While this school of thought is fundamental to NLP, it has been around much longer. For centuries Buddhists have practised meditation to control what is referred to as the 'monkey mind', a phenomenon where the brain is seen as a frenzied thought generator. Monkeys swing from tree-to-tree, taking a bite from a banana and dropping it on the ground before moving to the next one, which is similar to how our minds bounce from thought to thought. Although this concept pre-dates civilised science, modern studies

have found that it's true: we think a lot. In fact, somewhere between 30,000 to 70,000 thoughts cross our minds each day.

According to Muneer Samnani, NLP Trainer at OMC Dubai, the majority of these thoughts are harmful. "Leading behavioural researchers have found that as much as 77 per cent of everything we think is negative or counterproductive," he says.

This disparity between positive and negative thoughts is made yet more unbalanced, as our brains are wired to absorb negative memories more readily. This was useful when we were cavemen and felt an emotion like hunger. Our brains would shut out all other thoughts and focus on one – sourcing food.

Times have changed but, unfortunately, our brains didn't get the memo – we still absorb those negative emotions. Muneer says that's why it's vital we don't start the day on the wrong foot. "If you wake up in the morning and have a negative thought, immediately your energy level drops, your shoulders drop and your physiology changes, which affects the way you behave," he says. "As soon as you change your thoughts, it immediately affects your internal state. The cells in your body are influenced by what is happening inside your head."

To counteract negative thoughts, emotions and worries, many of us will give ourselves a good talking to, something that Muneer refers to as "self-talk". This inner dialogue is a fundamental aspect of NLP, and it's something that a lot of us are getting wrong. "Your brain doesn't process negative language – words like can't and don't," says Muneer. "If I say, don't think about a blue camel, what happens is that you immediately think about a blue camel." ➤

## CAREER

Many of us are hindered in our career progression due to 'self-talk', as we're programmed to think of work in a negative way. "Has it ever happened that you're about to walk into a presentation and you think, 'I hope I don't forget anything,' and guess what? You do," says Muneer. "As soon as you tell your brain not to do something, it will do it." Change the 'self talk' language to something like, 'I hope that I deliver a confident presentation.' Straight away, you are now visualising confidence, rather than the terrifying prospect of messing up.

Once you've mastered the art of 'self talk', the next step is to master conversation with others. Whether you're looking to cultivate a good relationship with your boss or a client, the key word is rapport. "With a human there are no user manuals, so it's very important to listen closely to see what makes them tick," Muneer says. The best way to do this is to 'match and mirror'. In other words, you become a social chameleon, copying body language and tone of voice. The other person will subconsciously recognise that you're on the same wavelength and develop a connection quickly.

## RELATIONSHIP

Staying connected is equally important in your relationship. NLP splits people into three categories: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Visual people respond to visual stimulus, auditory people to spoken word, and kinesthetic to emotional feelings. Muneer says that it's useful to know which category your partner falls into, so you know how to make them feel special. "If someone's wife is auditory, even if her husband takes her out for dinner and buys her gifts, she won't feel loved," he says. "Her husband needs to actually say 'I love you' to her."

The best way to work this out is to observe their behaviour. Do they talk out loud when they read? Or speak quickly when they're nervous? This indicates that they're auditory and need lots of verbal communication. Are they creative? Do they have vivid daydreams when they listen to music? They are most likely visual and need to see your affection. Are they quite tactile? Or have a low concentration threshold?

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This suggests they're kinesthetic and respond best to physical interaction.

## PARENTING

While adults are easily influenced by subconscious suggestion, children are even more impressionable. Therefore, it's important to realise that their environment directly affects their behaviour. Muneer says we are constantly creating 'anchors', which can be positive or negative. These transpire as habits or learned behaviour in all aspects of our lives. As a parent it's important to recognise what kind of 'anchors' you're creating for your child.

"Parents usually hug their child when they're upset and, therefore, it becomes a negative anchor," he says. "Start hugging your child when he or she is happy and it will become a positive anchor." Once you have established this anchor, if you cuddle your child when they're upset, their negative feelings should ease. "It's like depositing money in the bank and withdrawing it when you need it," says Muneer.

We live in a very materialistic society where we're constantly searching for external things to make us happy: a better job, more money, a loving relationship, well-behaved children. But according to NLP, we've got the pursuit of happiness the wrong way round – learn how to be happy first, and the rest should follow. ■

## *The positive anchor cheat sheet*

**Step One:** Identify what state of mind you would like to be in. Maybe you need self-confidence for a speech, or you need to calm down after a stressful day.

**Step Two:** Remember a specific situation where you felt this emotion. It could be something like walking on stage at your graduation to a raucous applause, or a moment on holiday that you felt peaceful.

**Step Three:** This is where you drop the anchor. Different things work for different people. Some like to associate a song with that moment, others can simply picture the scene in their heads.

**Step Four:** Use the anchor when you need it. For example, if you're feeling incompetent or nervous before a speech, play the song that you associate with self-confidence and hold that moment in your head.