

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox - Self-Care and Improvement: Working with State (Part 1)

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Public Service Warning:

Some may find the contents of this entry a little too "funky" for their liking. The ideas within may challenge your concept of notions of human autonomy. If so, I recommend you move on. Nothing to see here. If you are still reading, thank you for staying.

For readers who are new, the "Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox" series is an ongoing series focused on using Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) in our practice of amicable dispute resolution. The first section (with 6 entries) focused on rapport (the first of which can be found [here](#)).

This second section focuses on matters of self-care and personal improvement for mediators. For ease of reference and the convenience of readers, I will list in this and subsequent entries the series the entries in this section.

1. [A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox - Self Care and Improvement: Preliminary Thoughts](#)
2. [A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox - Self Care and Improvement: Working with Physiology](#)

By way of quick recap, NLP sees Physiology, State and Representation as interacting systemically. When we experience something, our physiology, representation and state have to form a certain configuration and by changing one of these aspects of the configuration, we can change the experience. The previous entry dealt with changing the physiology aspect of the configuration.

In this third entry of this section, we will focus on changing the state aspect of the configuration. Specifically, we will be looking at how we can do this via a process called anchoring.

At this point, it would be helpful to define for our purposes what anchoring is and what it isn't.

First, readers might be familiar with the term anchoring, not from NLP but, from the field of negotiation. Put simply, anchoring is setting and asking for a goal that is higher (or lower as may be appropriate) than what you might be content in getting. This presupposes that there will be some sort of bargaining and concession giving. For example, if you wanted a sell your smart phone for \$300, you might ask for higher figure like \$400, fully expecting that you would be bargained down. This is not the notion of anchoring (in NLP) that we are referring to in this entry.

Secondly, what is NLP anchoring then? Put simply, it is stimulus-response conditioning. For some readers, the name Pavlov might ring a bell. Pavlov is probably most famously known for his experiment where he associated a dog's salivation response (induced by the presentation of food) to the ringing of a bell. After the response (salivation) was conditioned to the stimulus (the bell), Pavlov found that he could induce salivation by simply ringing the bell. Put another way, one could connect two seemingly disparate stimulus and response such that activating the stimulus can trigger the response.

At this point, some readers are thinking "Wait, I'm not a dog. And humans are far more complex than dogs! Aren't they?" Yes, we are more complex than dogs. But that doesn't mean that we are above stimulus-response condition. Pavlov's work on conditioning help form the basis of the general approach to human psychology called [behaviourism](#).

You can also test this in your own experience. Can you think of a person with whom you have a negative response to? This may be a colleague or a teacher with whom your interactions in the past have been negative, and now, when you interact with them (even when they are trying to be nice), you experience the negative feelings of the past? You have essentially associated the negative feelings (response) to that person (stimulus). In fact, you may not even have to interact with them and just thinking about them can cause those negative feelings to return! A phobia is an intense disproportionate negative response to what is, in most cases, a relatively harmless stimulus.

Of course, our responses do not necessarily have to be negative. Many of us have positive feelings from childhood associated with certain smells like fresh bread or that of a favourite soft toy. And I am certain that there are songs which may be associated with very pleasant memories.

The notion of anchoring in NLP is the process by which we can deliberately connect a chosen stimulus (the anchor) with a desired response. We can then call up that desired response anytime we want by activating (or firing) that anchor.

Why then might we want to create these anchors? Have you ever been in a situation where you wished you felt more confident? Or resourceful? Or motivated? For example, before a mediation, it is often useful to be in a resourceful and confident state as parties often take their cue from you. Anchoring allows you to easily access the states you need when you want them.

We will explore in future entries variations on anchoring, chaining anchors and collapsing anchors. The rest of this entry will focus on how to establish an anchor.

How then do we create an anchor? The steps are:

1. Identify your desired state
2. Identify a suitable anchor
3. Access the state
4. Link the anchor
5. Break the State then Test the anchor
6. Repeat steps 3-5 until a strong anchor is established

I will go through each step briefly and highlight certain aspects that need particular attention. For those who would like to set an anchor for yourself, I recommend reading through the steps first and then going through them again, and perform each step.

1. Identify your Desired State

What is the desired state that you wish to link to your anchor? It is important when selecting this state that it be a positive and intense state. For example, a state like "pleased" does not have the intensity that will be easily anchored. "Overwhelming Joy" works much better.

When I first learnt to anchor, I wanted to feel confidence when public speaking. My trainer helped me intensify that state with the use of modifiers so that my desired state became "unshakeable confidence". So, feel free to use linguistic modifiers as you identify your desired state.

2. Identify a suitable anchor

What is the anchor you will link the desired state to? An anchor can be visual (an internal image or an external object you might see) or auditory (an internal sound/voice or an external sound/voice) or kinesthetic (an external touch). For the purposes of learning how to set an anchor, I suggest using a kinesthetic anchor.

It is important that this anchor is unique. What this means is that it must not be an anchor that can accidentally get activated. A touch on the forearm might not be sufficiently unique because it is possible that in day to day interactions, you will get touched on the forearm.

It is also important that the anchor is easily replicable in the context you wish to use it in. My first anchor was the touching of my left little finger to my left thumb (forming a circle). This was not something that would be fired off accidentally and was something I could do without people noticing. So, go ahead and identify a suitable anchor for yourself.

3. Access the state

It is important to fully access the state so that you have a good quality response to be anchored. What does it mean to fully access the state? There are two ways in which we access our experiences, dissociated and associated. Association is remembering or experiencing something in your own body, seeing and hearing things as if you were there and feeling all the feelings that are connected with that experience. Dissociation is remembering or experiencing something outside your own body, watching yourself experiencing that moment.

This is best illustrated by an example. Have you ever been on a roller-coaster? And if not, can you imagine what that might be like? I am going to ask you to experience this in two different ways.

First, I want you to imagine sitting on a bench watching yourself in a roller coaster that is clanking its way up the tracks. You can see the roller-coaster reach the peak of the track and then tumble downwards. Notice how this feels.

Now for the second way. I want you to imagine being in the front seat of the roller-coaster. You feel the seatbelt against your body as your hands grip the bar in front of you. You can hear the steady clanking of the roller-coaster as it climbs and the vibration of the tracks with each clank. You can see the track in front of you diminish as the roller-coaster climbs until it disappears altogether at the peak. There is that eternal moment of silence just before the roller-coaster plunges down! You can hear the wind whooshing past your face as the screams of the passengers assail you're your ears. Now notice how this feels.

For most people, the second experience provides a more realistic feel of the event than the first. We call the first dissociated and the second associated. When you access your desired state, you need to be associated.

When I established my first anchor of unshakeable confidence, I was asked to remember a time when I felt unshakeable confidence, and then to go back to that time and to experience that time of unshakeable confidence, seeing what I saw, hearing what I heard and feeling the feelings of unshakeable confidence.

For some people, association is easy and natural. For others (like myself), dissociation is a more familiar so we need to be more mindful about practicing how to associate into our experiences. You might not get it on the first go but as they say, practice makes perfect.

4. Link the anchor

When linking or setting the anchor, timing is everything. It is important to realise that states have an ebb and flow to it. When experiencing a state, it starts by increasing, peaks and then decreases. The key is to link the anchor just before the state peaks, hold it and then to release it just after it peaks. Done this way, you will ensure that the anchor is set at the highest intensity of the state.

I recommend that you access the state a few times first to get a sense of the ebb and flow before you link the anchor.

5. Break the State then Test the anchor

Once the anchor has been set, break state. This means to think about something else or stand up, walk around. This is to basically reset your state. Then you test the anchor.

Testing the anchor means to activate or fire off the anchor and notice how that brings back the desired state. When doing so, it is important to reproduce the anchor as precisely as possible. So if the anchor set was a touch (with moderate pressure) on the second knuckle of the right hand, a touch with **light pressure**, or a

touch on the **third knuckle** of the right hand, or a touch on the second knuckle of the **left hand** won't work.

When done correctly, you should feel the state return. If it does not, or does not return in the same intensity, there are three common possibilities. First, you might not have associated into the desired state. Second, even if you did associate, you might not have linked the anchor at the correct time. Thirdly, you might not have replicated the anchor precisely when testing.

6. Repeat steps 3-5 until a strong anchor is established

Sometimes, one iteration of setting the anchor is enough. However, for most people, especially if you are attempting this for the first time, you may have to set the same anchor a number of times before it takes. And as you get more experienced and better with the process, you may find that all it will take is one time.

As mentioned, the first anchor I ever set was a personal anchor of unshakeable confidence for public speaking. And I found that it was tremendously helpful for me to fire off the anchor every time I need to speak in public. What I found was that after a while, the context of public speaking *itself* became the anchor for the state of unshakeable confidence. I therefore didn't need to fire off the original anchor any more when speaking in public. The anchor is still there however, so in other contexts where I need to have unshakeable confidence, I can still fire off that anchor and access that state. At least until that too, becomes automatic!

Thank you for reading what has been quite a long entry. I hope you found it interesting and you will have fun practicing to set your own anchors!