

The Language of Hypnosis

As you read this, it might be interesting for you, if you were to be interested, to begin to wonder, to wonder, ... how what is written, ... what you read, ... can in some way, ... begin to relate to you, your learning, your experience, ... as you continue.

We are living in the information age, travelling the information highway, and yet increasingly suffer from information overload. Busy professionals face a daily dilemma about what to read and what to put in the bin. There is no shortage of information, and yet we are experiencing a crisis in communication. We see couples, families, teenagers, in pain over not being heard, understood, listened to – a breaking down of communication.

Humberto Maturana reminds us that communication is a co-ordination of action, not transmission of information, and we see that in our clients all the time. So much suffering happens when someone doesn't listen to their own body, partner, child, parent, employer, employee. Clearly this communication difficulty happens in a sea of information - sometimes problems are information-soaked, but as long as there is no connection, no effective interaction, then no communication has happened.

We humans are linguistic beings, immersed in language, but all too often ineffectual in our use of this precious gift.

How many times have we found ourselves trying to sort out what a couple's argument is *really* about? How many times has our well meant attempt resulted in the argument worsening? We sense that we could help if we could find the right words, the right phrase, the right communication ... but what would be helpful in these kinds of all too common situations?

A couple came for counselling because they were having difficulties communication. She said he didn't understand. He said all she did was nag. She explained how frustrated she was being at home with the kids all day, just waiting for some adult conversation. He complained that he had been talking all day at work, trying to sort out problems there. The last thing he needed was to hear about more problems, even about his own kids. He wanted a bit of peace and quiet.

The more each explained to the other, the more frustration and resentment was produced, and the worse the situation became.

The last thing either of them needed was yet another individual telling them what they should be doing, so I began to speak indirectly to both of them. "I wonder how you might be able to resolve this? Wife, how could you deal with this so you could have the conversation you need without alienating your husband. Husband, What could you do that would take care of your need for some peace, and at the same time talk with your wife, who you care so much about? Both of you, what could you begin to do together that might be fun; who would be the first to notice when things had started to improve? Looking back after you have solved this dilemma, what would you think? It would be so satisfying to both of you if you could ... make a beginning as soon as you return home."

By speaking indirectly, not directing them, they were able to explore, together, how they could begin. This was all that was needed to get them back on track – back in communication. But it was

not information – they had plenty of that – it was re-opening them to solving this together – a coordination – which helped. By being indirect, there was the possibility of them responding. Directly ordering them to do something would have prevented this possibility.

Anyone with teenage children has ample experience of the ineffectiveness of issuing orders. Direct communications such as “Clean up your room NOW!” or “Go to your room and don’t come out until you have finished all your homework!” are likely to be greeted with a sneer or a rejoinder such as “You can’t make me!”. When attempting to get a younger child to eat their greens, attempting to force the food on the child is usually totally ineffective, since even if we manage to get the food down the throat of the increasingly rebellious child, there is no guarantee that it will stay there.

Concerns about how to speak to children and parental frustration from failed attempts to communicate with their children stem from a position of parental power, righteousness and force. This is the cause of the problem! When a parent begins to be less directive and more indirect, the mood changes. If the child is invited rather than told, they can refuse without anyone losing their dignity, and the future relationship remains in place. We parents are usually the ones who struggle with this issue. “Just because what I’m doing isn’t working, why should I do something different. I’m right. I’m the parent after all!” These positions cause and perpetuate conflict and prevent even the possibility of effective communication.

Indirect Communication Forms.

The Sufis remind us that sometimes we must speak to the window so the door may hear. Indirect communication styles can sometimes help where a more direct approach can’t. My colleague Jeffrey Zeig PhD claims in Zeig’s first law that “The degree of indirection is directly proportional to the degree of anticipated difficulty.”

If a client arrives and informs us that 15 of their friends have previously been helped by us, and they are expecting to be the 16th, then we hardly need be indirect. Some straight talking is likely to be what is required. If a client arrives, and informs us that they have been to 15 therapists previously, none of whom were any damn use, and they are not expecting us to do any better, then it’s time to get indirect.

If a client could respond to direct suggestion such as “Do this”, “Don’t do that”, then they would most likely have got over their problem and not be seeking therapeutic help. Many of us don’t like being TOLD what to do, and find ourselves automatically responding with a polar reaction of “Don’t tell ME what to do!” It is with this human tendency in mind that we find the use of indirect forms of communication to have an important place in therapy.

We all use these indirect forms of communication from time to time, and as you read what follows, it could be instructive to recognise some of the ways you are already using so that you can be more effective in using these forms of communication and enhance their effectiveness.

There are a number of indirect communication forms which can be useful here, and I will mention only four – softening directives, presuppositional links, creating alternatives, and saying nothing. Later we will explore the use of stories as therapeutic metaphors as even more indirect communications.

Softening Directives.

When someone comes with a problem, it is not helpful for us to say “Don’t do that, do this” or “Don’t do it that way, do it this way” or “Instead of not doing it, just do it”. While that may be the message the client needs to hear, simply saying that is most unlikely to create the desired result.

It can be more useful to soften the message with a gentle, permissive, open ended invitation such as “Perhaps you could ...” or “I wonder if you might ...” or “How will you decide when you are ready to ...” and then follow with the suggestion. It can be even more helpful if the two components of the message are separated by a pause, which adds dramatic impetus.

The communications in the above paragraph might then translate into: “I wonder when you will be ready to [pause] not do that, and how you will feel when you [pause] do this instead”, or “How would it be for you if you were to [pause] not do it that way, and who would be the first to notice when you do [pause] do it this way” or “You don’t need to know when you’ll be ready to [pause] just do it.”

Each of the above examples contain the original suggestion, but instead of them being heard as a command, to be obeyed or resisted, they can be heard as invitations to be taken up, or not, and if the taking up of the suggestions is in the direction desired by the client, they are very likely to follow along.

Formula: Permissive invitation ... [pause] ... directive.
eg. you could ... [pause] ... go into hypnosis.
you might enjoy ... [pause] ... letting your eyes close.
perhaps you are already beginning to ... [pause] ... let your mind drift.
I wonder how soon you’ll notice ... [pause] ... your comfort is increasing.

Presuppositional Links.

These forms of communication are variations on “While you’re on your feet, would you put the cat out” or “Since you are going down the street, could you get a loaf of bread?”. If we examine the relationship of the two components of those statements, there is no logic in the linkage, but the fact that the first utterance is undeniable – “You are on your feet” or “You are going down the street” – adds to the credibility of what follows “Would you put the cat out” or “Could you get a loaf of bread”. This juxtaposition of phrases doesn’t guarantee that the cat will be put out or that the bread will be bought, but it makes that result more likely, and in a mood of cooperation.

“Tell me about your problem” can translate into “Since you are here, you could find your own way to begin to [pause] tell me about the problem”. “What’s the solution for your present problem?” could become “Because you want to solve this dilemma, it will be interesting for you to find ways of recognising those solutions”.

“Now that you have arrived, what could we speak about that would be helpful to you?” or “As you are beginning to speak about your trouble, I wonder what you can discover that will be useful to you?” can be so helpful to ease the conversation into a beginning and overcome any initial reticence. As the counselling session progresses, it can be helpful to ask “We have been talking about your situation for a while now, and you might be interested to reflect on what is already becoming clearer

to you.” In accessing resources and directions for a couple we might inquire “You have been together now for ... years. What is it about your relationship that has been most important to you?”. This inquiry shifts the direction and intensity away from a circular discussion about any problems and towards actively searching for useful, relevant, practical solutions. I want to emphasise that asking this kind of question has the potential to change the outcome.

Formula: Because [something undeniable] is happening ... then ... [something desirable] can happen.

eg since you're on your feet, could you put the cat out.

because you're here, you can go into hypnosis.

while you're here, you can learn what you need.

as we're talking, you can already begin to relax.

who will be the first to notice that things are OK?

how will they notice?

what is different about this solution that has you realise it is permanent?

Creating Alternatives.

I we were to ask a meat eater to a vegetarian smorgasbord lunch, with more than a hundred choices, few would ask “Where's the meat”.

Telling a client to stop smoking, lose weight, exercise more, relax, be calm, stop being afraid of spiders or speaking in public will only escalate fear and worry which is likely to be present anyhow. There is another way of offering the same ideas.

The generic form is “Will you get over your problem quickly, slowly, suddenly, intermittently at first?”, “Will you notice the changes before they happen, as they are happening, after they have happened, or will it take someone else to notice that you don't have that problem any more? Will it go without anyone noticing?” “Will you lose the problem at home first, or at work, or will it just go from all areas of your experience?” When a client hears such a range of alternatives – all of which are in the direction of solutions, none of which allow for the continuation of the problem – they are more likely to take up some of the momentum which is generated by such a plethora of options. Any uncertainty remaining is about which alternative will be acted on, and since each is in the direction of the client's solution, any option will be useful.

A wide variety of alternatives can be generated for the client. This includes time [now or later], speed [slowly or quickly], awareness [notice or not, by client or other], emotional response [surprise, relief or joy], location [here or there] and consistency [constant or intermittent at first] to name some. The delight for the therapist also adds to the pleasure and satisfaction of all.

Formula: Think of a solution a client has identified and suggest that this can happen in as many different ways as you can invent.

eg. Would you prefer to go into trance before you close your eyes or after?

Will you solve your problem as we're talking, after you leave here, in your dreams, just as you wake in the morning, watching television, or won't you even need to notice you've solved that problem. Perhaps it will just fade from your awareness.

Will your body relax so your eyes can close, will your eyelids relax so your muscles can let go of their tension, will they both change together, or will you experience something quite different as you go into hypnosis?