

Over the years, the focus of attention in equestrian sports has shifted considerably. Gone are the days when we would drag our long suffering ponies out of the field, make them spic and span for the highlight of the riding calendar.....our local gymkhana!

Equestrian sports at every level are now much more complex with access to greater knowledge and awareness on a whole host of topics from feeding and shoeing, fitness, veterinary advances, technology and latest training practices. Even at foundation level (which used to be pony club for those too young to remember), the sport has evolved beyond recognition. Correct training is now introduced much earlier and in some cases takes precedent over 'doing the sport for fun'. More and more of us are taking training and the development of our skills much more seriously, often spending considerable sums on weekly or monthly lessons with prominent trainers.

For some, this is about enjoying the process of learning with our lessons being the main source of enjoyment and satisfaction in their own right. For others it is more about achieving higher standards of riding, or enhancing our competitive performance. And for some, it is more out of habit or sense of duty.

However, how is it that some of us, despite having access to training and horsepower that many can only dream of still do not fulfil their true potential and regularly 'under-perform' when under competitive pressure? The point is that many of us spend much time and effort perfecting the physical aspects of our performance and pay comparatively little attention to the mental aspects.

Example

Remember learning to drive? At first you had to consciously think about where the gears were, when to use and release the clutch, when to move up or down a gear, which way round the roundabout to go etc. As you became more proficient many of these things became 'automatic'. You probably change gears now without even thinking about it, it just seems to happen on its own! This is because our behaviour patterns have become so well embedded that we automatically 'feel' when it is time to change gear at a subconscious level, leaving our conscious minds to concentrate on other priorities.

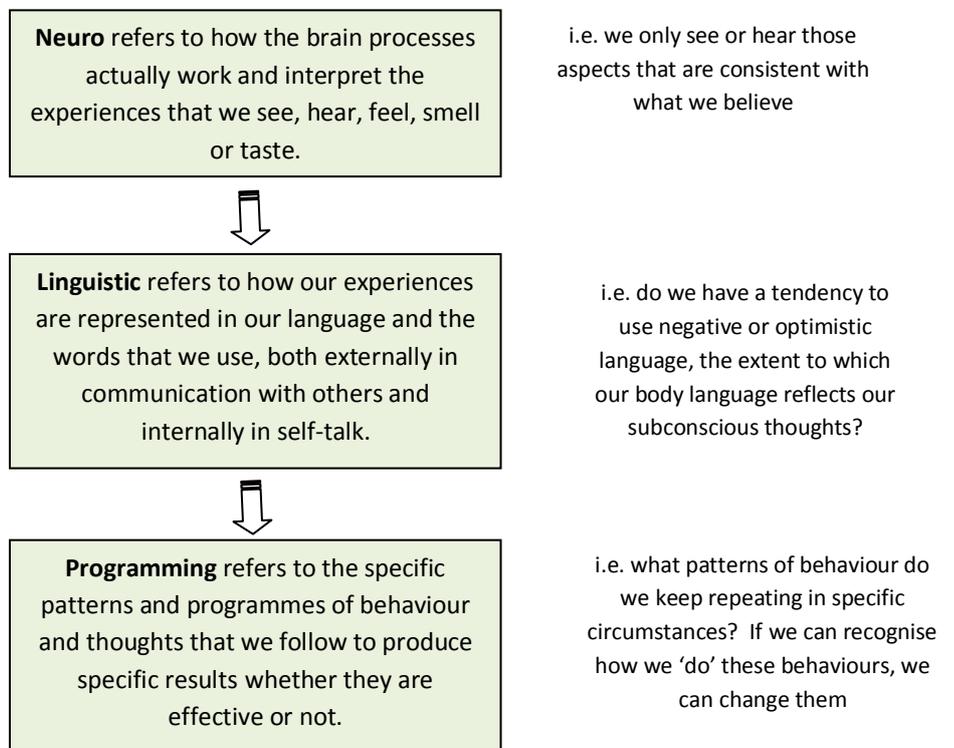
Now imagine having to drive abroad on the opposite side of the road, this will probably feel strange and you are likely to revert to thinking consciously about what you are doing again (are the gears in the same place, does your right hand understand where to find them like your left hand did, where are the indicators, which lane do I need to be in to cross the roundabout?).

If an instructor were in the car with you explaining when to change gear and which lane to be in, would that make you feel more confident? Would you feel able to go out and drive well on your own?

The fact is that if you believe that you cannot drive on the opposite side of the road, no amount of instruction on when to change gear will necessarily change this (why do some people fail their driving tests five or six times?.....usually not through a lack of training).

Research shows that our internal thought processes and emotional state actually have a greater impact on our overall performance than skills alone. That is not to suggest that just thinking positively can replace good quality training, however it does enable us to access and utilise the things we've learned in lessons rather than 'freezing in the saddle' and forgetting all the good things we've learned. It also suggests that many of us need to spend more time considering the mental aspects of our riding as equal to the physical aspects if we are to get the best return on our investment.

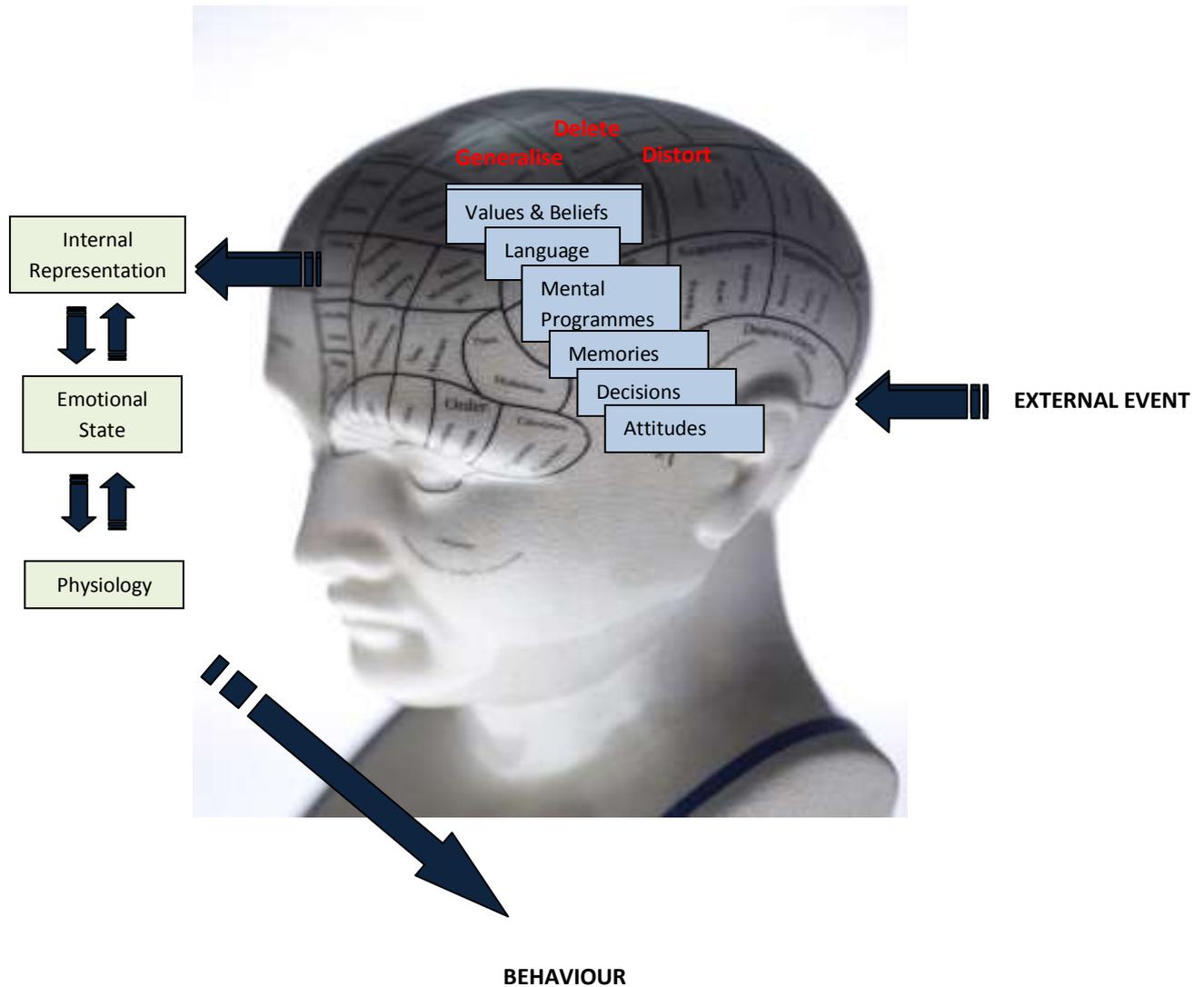
For this reason many sports are embracing the concept of NLP. With high profile sports such as football, rugby, golf and cricket regularly employing the services of sports psychologists or NLP practitioners even in non-professional sports, it is interesting that equestrian sports are currently some way behind. Yet given the 'risk factor' of our sport and the types of issues that riders often face, NLP techniques have frequently been credited with the removal of mental or emotional blocks that conventional instructors and trainers have been unable to tackle effectively.



There are a wide range of common issues that NLP can help with:

- ⇒ Managing emotional states – nerves, aggression, fear, freezing in the saddle etc
- ⇒ Competition preparation – mental rehearsal techniques, remembering dressage tests, show jumping rounds
- ⇒ Dealing with self-limiting beliefs and negative self talk
- ⇒ Overcoming bad memories and phobias – 'bogey fences', ditches, steps etc.
- ⇒ Dealing with distractions and concentration – worrying about what spectators think
- ⇒ Setting goals and outcomes for your riding
- ⇒ Recovering from injury
- ⇒ Managing motivation
- ⇒ Riding more confidently

- ⇒ Building self-esteem
- ⇒ Managing stress or anxiety
- ⇒ Relaxation
- ⇒ Removing unwanted habits or behaviours



Common issues such as these can be tackled at either an emotional, cognitive or physiological level. For example, problems such as nerves or lack of confidence are often to do with the emotional state we put ourselves into as a result of how we interpret a particular external event. We are all capable of changing our state from being in a negative state to a more positive one, we just need to make a choice to identify and adopt a more helpful state that will better serve us in meeting our riding goals (assuming we have set some of course).

Consider a small child who has just fallen over. Its first reaction will usually be to cry (loudly!) Now consider what happens when you walk into the room brandishing an ice cream. Suddenly the child's expression changes completely, it stops crying in a flash and it becomes very excited about the ice cream, even though the tears are not yet dry.

As children we are all experts at changing our emotional state in order to meet our immediate goals. We do not dwell on the past and analyse the rights and wrongs of it or the likelihood of it happening again, we live more 'in the moment'. It is only as adults that we become stuck on re-living what was or what might happen that prevents us from adopting the most useful positive state for the task in hand.

'My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened.'

Michel de Montaigne

The subconscious part of our brain is extremely powerful. It tends to work in pictures and images which is why when we are worried or very excited about something we often get a picture in our heads of the event e.g. winning a competition, or enjoying a hack.....or falling off in a ditch! The subconscious brain is goal seeking, therefore whatever you are spending time thinking about, it will filter the things you see, hear or feel according to what it is you are thinking about.

Example

A few years ago, I bought a Smart car to ferry my whippets about to their various social engagements, and to use for short journeys where it was more economical to use a smaller car. When my friend saw the car she was absolutely dumbfounded as to why anyone would want to drive, much less own one!

Since taking the Whips out for a spin in it, she has informed me that everywhere she now goes she seems to see nothing but Smart cars, even though they have been around for many years.....has the world gone mad she asks?

Given that my buying the car focused her attention, her brain now considers that to be the 'goal' and filters information that she sees and hears to ensure that she spots every Smart car known to man on the road. She even reports picking up on the word 'smart' when other people use it in everyday conversation. You may have noticed similar things happening to you if you are seeking to acquire a new lorry.... husband or a nice expensive saddle of a particular brand.

'You get what you focus on' is the rule here. Unfortunately, our subconscious cannot tell the difference between a positive goal and a negative goal. For example, if you spend your time thinking about all the things you *don't* want i.e. forgetting your test or having a stop at the water, guess what your brain does? It begins to create HD ready pictures of you going wrong in the test or stopping at the water (internal representation). This then triggers your emotional state (e.g. feeling nervous) which then triggers a physiological reaction in you whereby your legs feel like wet spaghetti or you

feel sick and ride into the water like the stop is a foregone conclusion – this reaction is what your horse responds to who promptly picks up from you that a ‘half day at the office’ is all that is required on this occasion. Your coveted refusal at the water is now all but guaranteed!

The message here is to make sure that you are focusing on what you *do* want, rather than what you don’t want. Writing down your riding goals, however low key is a great way to build positive mental pictures for your subconscious to work towards.

Case Study

Louise suffered from negative thinking about her riding, particularly about riding cross country. The trouble would start the night before, and by the time she got to the competition she had all but convinced herself she was not up to it and that she would have a nasty fall and end up in hospital, her horses could starve to death as there would be nobody to feed them, she would lose her job, fail on her mortgage payments and end up a homeless alcoholic whilst the world around her spontaneously combusts and is no more.....all because she rode cross country!

The problem was that Louise allowed herself to think about what she didn’t want rather than how she wanted her cross country rounds to be. This gave her subconscious a ‘goal’ to which is duly responded by seeking out all the possible ways to fail and creating vivid pictures in her mind.

By using a range of NLP techniques, Louise learned how to create images in her mind of how it would be if she had a fantastic cross country ride. She began the process by managing her internal self talk to ensure that this was positive and then used mental rehearsal techniques to imprint a successful ‘movie’ in her head of her riding really well (this gives the brain a positive goal to accomplish). Finally she ‘anchored’ a highly positive, confident feeling to this movie so that each time she played it in her head she felt highly confident and excited about riding rather than being hijacked by negative feelings triggered by the irrational thought processes she had previously.

We can also work to change the physiological reactions that we experience when under certain circumstances. As children we are ‘blank slates’ and we begin to develop patterns of behaviour and habits of reacting in a particular way as we experience new things. If a small child interprets its first jumping experience as negative, it is likely to repeat this pattern next time it jumps a fence before it has even left the ground. Next time the brain picks up a potential ‘threat’ situation, it will follow the same process to tell the body it is time to be ‘nervous’. We all have different reactions when we are nervous. Some of us may feel sick, others might shake, withdraw or get a bit snappy. Whatever *you* do when you are nervous, is likely to be coded in your brain and your brain has made a connection between being nervous and your usual physiological symptoms.

If we change those physiological symptoms, the brain fails to recognise that we are nervous because we have broken its usual pattern. For example, if I am feeling very nervous and I have a heavy ‘knot’ in my stomach, I might try imagining that I am going to move the knot to a different part of my body.

If it is large I make it small, if it is dark in colour I change it to a light attractive colour, if it is a certain shape I change it to something else, if it is still I make it move, if it is solid I make it transparent etc. This way I am destroying the way my brain usually does 'nervous' and it no longer recognises the situation as being a threat and fails to trigger the usual negative physical feelings.

From a personal perspective, I wish I had come across NLP earlier in my career. That said, I have found it an invaluable tool in changing the way I prepare for competitions and respond to setbacks or disappointments. I now rely on my trainers to provide the technical input to my riding rather than the confidence giving or organisational aspects (although these often come out of a good lesson anyway). These are aspects that trainers are often expected to provide but actually have very little control over – hence those riders who always ride well in lessons only to have everything fall apart when they are on their own. With a bit of practice, anyone can use NLP techniques as they are applicable in all aspects of our lives - I use them in sport, business and life coaching – and once you have mastered some very simple techniques they are with you for life.

From The Neck Up is led by Danielle Olding NLP Trainer, Master Sports Practitioner and UKCC 3 Level Coach who works extensively with a range of equestrian sports, coaching both amateur and professional riders.

Danielle spends time delivering workshops and seminars throughout the UK and works on a one to one basis with both professional and amateur riders to improve confidence and develop consistent levels of performance.

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