“Your task is that of altering, not abolishing.”

—Milton H. Erickson, the greatest therapist who ever lived.
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Introduction

Nearly everyone has negative internal self-talk at times; some of us have this internal chatter going on almost all the time. An internal voice may remind us of past failures, sorrows, or disappointments, torture us with criticism or verbal abuse, describe frightening or unpleasant futures, or disturb us in other ways. “You failed miserably” “What a loser I am.” “I’ll never succeed.” “Life is a crock.” “My life is over.” Typically this kind of internal voice causes unpleasant feelings, which are not very helpful in reaching goals and succeeding in life. You can probably easily think of some time in your life when an internal voice did this, putting you into an unpleasant state. These bad feelings can be the root cause of a very wide variety of problems, some of them quite serious and long-term. In this book we’re going to show how these inner voices can be transformed, and the positive impact that can make in many areas of our lives.

“Nothing I can do will make a difference” in a low, slow voice can easily result in depression. “I’m think I’m about to die” in a rapid, high-pitched tempo can result in anxiety or panic. “Those bastards are out to kill me,” in a low angry tone can result in violence or paranoia. Often someone’s unpleasant feelings are so strong that they don’t notice that they are in response to what an internal voice is saying.

The realization that everyone hears internal voices is relatively recent. Not so long ago, most psychiatrists thought that hearing voices was a sign of psychosis, and a few still do. A patient would report hearing voices, and the psychiatrist would say to himself internally, “Hmmn, this guy is hearing voices; he must be nuts,” without realizing that he was also hearing a voice, and without—in most cases—being nuts himself!
The voices of some psychotic patients may sound much louder than what the rest of us hear, and sometimes they may seem to be external to them, but we all hear internal voices. In even earlier times, hearing an internal voice was thought to be a message from God, the devil, or some other external entity. Even today some people who commit crimes say that they were ordered to do it by a voice that they heard. “The devil made me do it.”

Hearing internal voices is a natural part of being able to understand and produce language. With the exception of a few people with damage to the language area of the brain, we all have internal voices, and usually they provide very useful information and direction. These voices may orient us to tasks that we need to accomplish, alert us to some kind of danger, review the events of the day, etc. “There’s an important meeting tomorrow morning.” “Let’s get out of here before the trouble starts.” “I got quite a lot done this week.”

Sometimes inner voices offer us useful advice. “Look both ways before crossing a street,” is a voice that most parents deliberately try to instill in their small children in order to protect them from being run over. At other times, an internal voice may simply offer information that is needed to solve a problem, or direct our attention to get back to an unfinished task. “I wonder if those towels are in the laundry.” “I’d better get going on that homework if I’m going to get enough sleep tonight.”

Infants begin to learn language by listening to parents and other people around them. The first step in this learning process is to remember the sounds that they heard, and slowly begin to recognize repetitions of those sounds and patterns of sounds. As they are doing this, they are also learning to produce sounds, first by babbling, and then gradually adjusting that babbling to approximate the sounds of the language that they are exposed to. Initially both the sounds that they hear, and the sounds that they are learning to produce have no meaning. They are just learning to recognize and produce the sounds of their native language.

The child’s next task is to divide the flow of language into separate words, and then to understand what the words mean by connecting them with recurring events. Just as in learning a foreign language, we begin to understand the meaning of what someone else is saying long before we are able to put words together into a reply. These internal voices that we remember are the basis for learning how to produce language and communicate with others around us. Much later we learn to recognize written words so that we can translate little squiggles on pages into the sounds of language, and understand books like the one you are reading. If we had no internal voices, we would not be able to understand the words that others say to us, and we would not be able to communicate with words. We would be forever limited to the nonverbal noises, gestures, and movements that we had as infants.
As we learned the particular words and grammar of the language of our parents, caretakers, or others around us, we also learned all the nonverbal musical sounds of their language—the volume, tempo, rhythm, timbre, intonation, hesitation, regional accent, emotional inflection, etc.

For instance, when you hear the voice of a stranger, you can determine with close to 100% accuracy if they are male or female, using these tonal cues—even though you may have no idea what aspects of tonality you are using to do this. And when you answer the phone, usually you can identify who it is by their tonality after hearing only a few words.

Pause right now to remember and listen to the voices of several people you know. Recall them one at a time, and hear the distinct tonality that each one uses. First recall the voice of one of your parents, . . .

(Three dots [. . .] indicates a pause for you to actually do the instruction, and notice what you experience. You will only really learn from this book if you pause for a few moments to try each little experiment.)

Now hear the voice of your other parent, . . .
And then recall the voices of several other important people in your past, . . .
And then some good friends of yours in the present . . .

Notice how each voice has a distinct tonality. Unless you are musically trained, it might be very hard for you to describe exactly how those voices differ, but you can still hear the differences clearly. Now listen to each voice that you just heard, in turn, and notice how your feelings change in response to each voice. . . .

Those feelings are partly in response to the words that you heard. But they are also in response to the unique tonality of each voice, and to the experiences that you associate with each of those people.

If we were fortunate, our parents were usually kind, nurturing, and understanding, and through imitation we learned to have inner voices that sound kind and understanding. If we were less lucky, we may have learned to talk to ourselves in a tone that is usually critical, distant, gloomy, dismissive, or even abusive.

And since even the most wonderful parents are sometimes tired, frustrated, irritable, limited, or out of choices, all of us also have memories of times when our parents communicated in ways that were less than ideal. Since this often occurred in situations that stirred strong emotions in us, these may have become strong “imprint” experiences that affect us throughout our later life—even if most of the time our parents spoke in more caring and reasonable ways.

Every other book on negative self-talk I have seen focuses primarily on the words that we say to ourselves, seldom on the tonality. Yet the tonality of a voice is often a major factor in how we respond to it. For instance, hear a voice that says, “I love you,” in a harsh, sarcastic voice. . . . Then hear a voice saying, “You son-of-
“a-bitch” in a soft loving sexy tonality. Did you respond primarily to the words or the tonality? Sometimes when you change the tonality of a voice, you don’t have to change the words at all.

Someone who experiences a lot of negative self-talk is often willing to do almost anything to quiet the voice, and avoid the bad feelings that the voice produces. Many people do this by seeking distractions of various kinds—taking risks, using drugs, overeating, etc. Many of these work temporarily, but many also have unpleasant long-term consequences.

Many who are tormented by their voices would gladly volunteer for a selective lobotomy in order to silence them. Although our internal voices are learned from other people in the real world, when we recall them they are inside us, so they are a part of us, a part of our own neurology. If we were successful in removing them, we would also remove all the positive things they can do for us, and we would become less whole, and less human. Eliminating a voice—even if it were possible, and even if it might make us feel better—is not a good solution.

Another quite popular and highly regarded approach is not quite as radical as silencing a voice. Many schools of psychotherapy, particularly Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, advocate arguing with an internal voice in order to overcome it or subdue it. If you have ever tried to argue with someone else in the real world, you may have realized how ineffective that usually is. Typically the other person will respond by redoubling their effort to convince you, and the same is true of arguing with your internal voices. Arguing with an internal voice usually makes the voice even stronger, which is probably not what you wanted. Even if you manage to shout down a troublesome voice temporarily, you can never really overcome it, and it will return to torment you.

This book takes a very different approach. By reading these pages, and doing the simple exercises offered here, you can learn how to change your own inner voices to enhance your life, and make each day a more positive experience. First you’ll learn how to identify the inner voices that have been causing you trouble. Then you’ll learn a variety of ways to rapidly change both the words, and how you say those words, to make your life work better. You’ll also learn to recognize what kinds of changes will actually improve your life, and what kinds of changes might sound good on the surface, but would actually cause you more trouble.

The developments in this book are based on the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) a field that has made possible a leap forward in personal growth and development. You can read a brief description of what NLP is in the appendix at the end of this book if you are interested. Or you can simply read on, and experience the application of these understanding to the topic of negative self-talk, and experience the benefits.
Refocusing Attention

When you have an unpleasant internal voice and you feel bad in response, it is natural to want to escape it so that you can feel better. One very ancient way to do this is to learn how to attend to something else, allowing the voice to recede into the background. At any moment we attend to only a very small portion of our experience. For instance, as you have been reading this chapter, you have probably not been paying attention to the sounds around you, some of which may have been quite loud or repetitive.

Pause now for a moment to listen to the sounds that you have been ignoring. . . . You didn’t have to deliberately ignore these sounds—and if you did try to do that, it probably resulted in paying even more attention to them! When you were focused on reading this book, the sounds around you simply faded into the background of your awareness. They were still there, but when you were not attending to them, you didn’t notice them, and they didn’t affect you.

Now focus your attention on your bodily feelings—the temperature, your posture, your breathing, etc. . . . As you do this, you may find that parts of your body have been in one position too long, and have become a bit stiff, motivating you to shift your position a bit to relieve that. Even when you are attending to your bodily feelings, you have probably been ignoring some of the messages coming in from different parts of your body, like the small of your back, the soles of your feet, the backs of your knees, etc. However, as soon as I mention those, you have to notice them in order to understand my words. You have only so much attention; as you attend to those bodily sensations, that withdraws attention from other feelings, and from the sounds around you, and all the other things that you could be aware of.

If you are watching an engrossing movie, or reading a fascinating book, you may find yourself almost completely oblivious to your bodily sensations and events around you. This principle, called figure-ground, or foreground-background, has even been used by hypnotists for over a hundred years to help people deal with intense chronic pain, by teaching them how to attend to other aspects of their ongoing experience.

Most of our problems and difficulties don’t exist in the “here and now”; they are usually either memories of the past, or imagining what might be happening right now in some other place, or thinking about the future. In many ancient meditative traditions, attention is focused on some aspect of our present experiencing—your breathing, or a candle flame, or a religious object—in order to withdraw attention from whatever is troubling us.

Our memories of past troubles only exist insofar as we resurrect them and bring them into the present moment. It is too bad that they happened even once; continu-
ing to recall them means that they keep happening over and over again. Wasn’t once already too much? Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped, tied to a tree, and sexually abused for nine months in 2002 when she was 14. After being rescued, she said that the key to her readjustment was letting go of the hate she felt toward her abductors. She said, “Nine months of my life was taken from me, and I wasn’t going to give them any more of my time.” That is a very useful attitude for anyone who has had bad experiences, freeing them from having to re-experience them over and over again.

This morning I was troubled by a potential legal problem that could result in a loss of a considerable amount of money. Although that is a problem in the real world, and I needed to do something about it, it does not actually exist in the present moment. I have not yet lost any money; that is only a possibility that might occur in the future. As Mark Twain observed, “I am an old man and have suffered through a great many troubles, most of which never actually happened.” Once I had done what I could to prevent the possible future problem, it made sense to return to the present moment, where everything is fine and I can relax.

Another way to refocus attention on the present moment is to engage in a sport, or some other activity that requires us to be in the present. If you are hitting or catching a fast-moving ball, you have to perceive it in the moment in order to do that. If you are cutting down a tree with a chain saw, you really need to attend to the saw, and which way the tree is likely to fall. Once I knew a woman whose guru told her to get a job chopping vegetables in a Chinese restaurant, a job that required her to chop vegetables very fast, with a very large and very sharp knife. That motivated her internal critical voices to be silent so that she could attend to the present moment and avoid losing some fingers.

Attending to anything in the present tends to withdraw our attention from an internal voice that talks about the past or future, or about present events in some other place. Learning how to redirect our attention in this way can free us from being helpless prisoners of our thoughts. This undoubtedly accounts for the popularity—and immense variety—of programs that advocate learning how to “be in the here and now,” some of which are thousands of years old.

The major difficulty with most meditative methods is that they typically take years of practice, and many people find them only partly effective. Another difficulty is that the idea of “being in the present moment” has sometimes become a universal prescription, applied to all self-talk, whether negative or positive. A voice that remembers a horrible past can also remind you of treasured memories and satisfying successes; a voice that predicts future failure and misery can also encourage you by forecasting pleasure and happiness. If you were always in the present moment, you would lose an extremely valuable source of support and optimism that can carry you through rough times.
Internal voices can be very destructive and disorganizing, or they can be very useful and supportive—and everything in between. This book will help you become aware of how you talk to yourself, and how you can change that in order to feel differently. We will be exploring a number of ways that you can transform your negative self-talk into something positive and useful.

For simplicity and ease of understanding, each chapter will be devoted to one or two methods for doing this, beginning with some very simple nonverbal ways that can be surprisingly rapid and effective. We will be exploring a number of ways to alter the voices themselves, both the words that they say and how they say those words, so that they become resourceful allies, instead of difficult obstacles.

Most people pay attention to the words that an internal voice says, and it can often be very useful to change those words. However, the nonverbal sounds that are used to convey those words are often much more important than the words themselves, and they are often much easier and simpler to change. So we will start there, with how a voice speaks, and only later show how to change what a voice says.
Almost everyone can easily think of a troublesome voice, but very few people notice where it is located in their personal space. The location of a voice turns out to be a major aspect of its impact on you, and it is one of the easiest things to change.

Listen now to a troublesome voice that makes you feel bad in some way, and notice its location in your personal space. Most voices are located either somewhere inside your head or in the space immediately surrounding your head.

Is it located somewhere inside your head or outside?

Is it in front or behind, left side or right side, above or below?

And which way it is pointed—toward you, away from you, or somewhere in between?

Take some time to identify all these different aspects of your voice. It may help to first gesture with your finger to where the voice is, and the direction it is pointed, and then find a way to describe what you discovered.

When a troublesome voice is located outside your head it is almost always pointed toward your head. Now that you know the location and direction of your troublesome voice, you can experiment with some changes, and notice how they change how you respond to it.

Changing Direction

First change the way the voice is pointing, and find out how this changes your experience of the voice. For most people this is quite easy; it is just not something they ever thought of doing. If you have any difficulty, simply allow that voice to
change direction. First try allowing that voice to *reverse* direction (usually this will make it point directly away from the head) and find out what that is like. . . .

Then find out what it is like to listen to the voice when it is pointing half way between toward you and away from you. . . .

Notice if there is any difference between when it is pointing straight up and straight down, . . .

Or between pointing left and right, . . .

Or forward and back. . . .

When the voice is pointing away from you, usually the volume is less, and your response to it is less intense. Most people feel better when a troubling voice is pointing away from them, and this makes it easier and more comfortable to listen to what the voice is saying. When it is pointing half way between those extremes, the intensity of your response is usually somewhere in between when it is pointing toward you and away from you.

Notice that I used the word “usually” and “most people” in the previous paragraph. I will often offer generalizations about how people respond to their internal voices, based on my experience of making these kinds of changes with a large number of people. However, you may sometimes have a different response than what I outline here.

Whenever you response is different than what I describe, that is very important information. Your response is *yours*, no matter what I may say is “usually true” for “most people.” It isn’t “wrong”; it’s just that your brain works somewhat differently. I will be offering you many changes to try out, so that you can find out what works for you—even if it is different from what most other people experience. Whenever you discover a change that is useful, that adds to your choices about how a voice sounds, and how you feel in response to it.

Simply changing the direction of the voice is only one small way that you can learn how to have some control over the intensity of your response to it, and this is a choice that you can now make at any time. Now return your voice to its original direction, so that you can discover other ways that you can change your response to a voice. . . .

**Changing location inside your body**

First, listen to the voice again, and notice your response. . . .

Is it any different than when you began reading this chapter? . . .

Now experiment with changing the *location* of the voice in a variety of ways, to experience the impact of hearing the same voice coming from different locations in space, and how your feelings change when you do this. Again, most people find this quite easy; it is just not something they ever thought of doing. If you have any difficulty, simply *allow* that voice to change its location.
Now hear that voice coming from your left elbow, and notice what that is like. . . .

Most people find that when their critical voice comes from their elbow, it is less impactful. The voice may also change in tonality when you do this, perhaps becoming quieter and higher pitched, and your feelings probably also became less intense.

Next I want to offer you a number of other choices about where you hear that voice coming from. Some of them will probably make the voice less unpleasant, while others may make it more unpleasant. Your job is to simply to try out each suggestion that I offer you, and pause to discover how it changes your experience.

Now hear this voice coming from your stomach or belly, and notice what that is like. . . .

Now hear that same voice coming from your right kneecap, and notice what that is like. . . .

Next, hear that voice speaking from your heart, and notice what that is like. . . .

Now hear that voice coming from your left big toe, and notice what that is like. . . .

Next, experiment with hearing that voice coming from some other part of your body, and find out what that is like. . . .

Finally, return that voice to its original location and direction. . . .

Pause to notice if your response to what the voice says in its original location is the same now as before you tried these experiments, or whether it is different now? . . .

Typically hearing an unpleasant voice in locations more distant from your head will be the most comfortable, and locations near your head, or inside your head, will be most unpleasant. Hearing a troublesome voice from the stomach is usually unpleasant, and the feeling that results may be confused with hunger, loneliness, or nausea. Hearing a troublesome voice coming from your heart may be particularly unpleasant and confusing. Some people actually do this without realizing it, and it is not particularly useful in helping them live productive lives. I have asked you to experiment with hearing a troublesome voice from your stomach or heart only to give you an experience of the importance of location.

Next review the results of these little experiments, and ask yourself, “In which location was it most comfortable for me to listen to this troubling voice?” . . .

Now hear the voice coming from that location, and experiment with also changing the direction of the voice, in order to find which direction improves your feeling response the most. . . .

**Changing location outside your body**

Now hear that voice coming from outside your body. First hear it from 2 feet in front of your face. . . .

And then 10 feet in front of you. . . .
And then 30 feet in front of you. . . .
And then 100 feet in front of you. . . .
And then even farther away than that. . . .
Usually a voice that is farther away will be less impactful, and easier to listen to. Often distance also changes the volume of the voice, and may also change its tonality. Although distance alone is usually a way to reduce the impact of a voice, direction can also be important, and I’d like you to experiment with that.

Now hear the voice behind you, and again experiment with hearing it 2, 10, 30, 100 feet away and even farther. . . .
Now compare hearing the voice the same distance in front of you and behind you, and notice any differences. . . .
Usually a voice that is behind you will be less impactful because many people have their past experiences behind them and their future experiences in front of them.

Next hear the voice coming from your left side, and experiment with distance in the same way—2, 10, 30, 100 feet away and farther. . . .
Next hear the voice on your right side, and experiment with distance in the same way. . . .
Now compare hearing the voice the same distance to the left of you and to the right of you, and notice any differences. . . .
Often a voice will be less impactful on the left than the right, because many people have their past on their left, and their future on their right.
Next hear the voice above you, and experiment with distance. . . .
Next hear the voice below you, and do the same. . . .
Now compare hearing the voice above you and below you, and notice any differences. . . .
I have asked you to experiment with hearing the voice in the six main spatial dimensions, but of course there are an infinite number of other possible directions. If you experiment with some other direction in relation to your body, you may find a way to change the impact of the voice even more. . . .
Why does location matter so much, and why does moving a voice farther away from your head usually make it less disturbing and easier to listen to? When something threatens us in the real world, if it is closer to us, we need to respond more quickly and intensely to protect ourselves. If a threat is farther away, we have more time to prepare a response, so it isn’t as urgent. When a threat is very close to you, you had better attend to it, but if it is behind you it is much less urgent, even when the content—what the voice says—is the same.
Changing the location in space also works with internal images. Recently Lewis Walker, an NLP-trained MD in Scotland, author of a book about medical
applications of NLP, (20) saw a young woman who had witnessed two of her friends killed in a motorcycle accident the day before:

When she came into my office she had already dissolved into tears before she sat down. Through the sobs she told me about the smash. One friend was decapitated, the other with a bit of leg thrown across the carriageway. As she described how “The pictures are all in front of my face,” both hands were gesturing about 2 inches from her eyes.

I said something like, “Let me take these for you,” as I reached over with my right hand and grabbed her pictures, while simultaneously making a “ripping” noise as I stood up and hauled them off to her left side, and then diagonally behind her. I asked her to “Look at all these pictures in my hand as they shrink way down in size and all the color drains away,” cupping and closing my right hand as I did so.

At this point her body in the chair was facing ahead, while her head was looking over her left shoulder. I took the images to the corner of the room near the door and said. “Now just imagine they’re fixed right here by a nail, and I hit the door post with my fist. “Now knowing that they’re fixed here, in your mind’s eye look straight ahead and tell me how things are different now. . . .”

She visibly relaxed, the tears subsided, and she felt more in control. As I sat down again in front of her I said, “Keeping them nailed over there, what happens as you take this into tomorrow, and the next day, into next week and next month (gesturing with my left hand along her future timeline out to her right) knowing that with each passing day that (pointing to her images of the accident) gets farther and farther away as it recedes into the distance.”

She was much calmer now and could tell me about what happened after the accident, and how their motorcycle group was still planning to go on a tour to Germany in 3 weeks, and that she was going to go out on her motorcycle with her husband when he got home that night.

The whole consultation lasted no more than 15 minutes, and probably saved weeks—perhaps years—of the standard approach of “talking it through.”

Some people may find that just reading the paragraph above has created nasty images of the crash. If so, you have an opportunity to use the same process that Lewis used, and verify how well and how quickly it works. First notice where your images of the crash are, and how you feel as you view them. . . .
Then simply allow those images to shift off to the left and behind you ten feet or more, and as they do, they can become small, flat, black and white photos, and then notice how your response to them is different.

**Changing Physical Location**

If you ask someone to change the location and direction of a voice, as described previously, they may find it difficult, especially if they are not used to making these kinds of changes. The voice may be difficult to move, or it may immediately move back to its previous location, as if it had a “mind of its own.” When this occurs, it will often be helpful to change your wording. Instead of “move the voice,” try saying, “watch as it moves,” or “notice what happens as you allow the voice to move” and see if that makes it easier for the voice to move away and achieve some distance between you and the voice.

If the voice still doesn’t move, or immediately returns to its original location when you move it, there may be a good reason, and it is best to respect this, even when you don’t know the reason. If you want to explore this further, you can imagine that the voice is another person, and ask it, “What would I lose if I moved the voice into that location?” and then listen to what the voice answers. The voice might say something like, “If you don’t listen to me, you might get into trouble.” If you reply to the voice, “In a farther location it would be easier for me to listen to what you say, and I would be more willing to hear you,” the voice may be willing to change location.

There are other ways to create separation between you and a voice that are less direct, and that almost anyone can do, and this is easy to confirm in your own experience. Think of a self-critical voice and notice whether it says, “I am—” or “You are—” and how you feel in response.

Now keep all the other words the same, but switch to the other possibility (from “I am—” to “You are—” or the reverse) and again notice any difference in how you feel in response.

When a voice says, “I am—(stupid, boring, etc.) there is usually very little separation between you and the voice; the conflict is apparently between two parts of yourself. But when the voice says “You are—” (stupid, boring, etc.) it is clear that the conflict is between you and someone else, and the voice is usually located outside your head, more distant.

When I do this, the location shifts from in the center of my head for “I am—” to a location outside my head and about a foot to the left of my left ear for “You are—”. This is true even when I don’t have an image of anyone saying those words. When the voice is in my head, I feel a little unsettled or wiggly, as if I don’t quite know who I am. Am I the voice, or am I my feelings in response to the voice? Since
they are in conflict, it is hard to identify with either one. But when the voice is out to the side, the separation between the two sides of the conflict—between the voice and my feeling in response—is much clearer. The voice is someone else, and my feelings are mine, and I feel more solid about who I am.

Now if you ask, “Who is speaking to you in this way,” or “Who does that voice belong to?” that makes an even clearer separation between you and the voice that is speaking to you. This separation is not just a matter of making an intellectual distinction between self and other; it actually increases your experience of separation in space. This greater separation will usually lessen the intensity of your feeling, because a danger or challenge that is farther away from you is less immediately threatening. You can easily confirm this in your own experience. Think of a troublesome voice, and first notice what it says. . . .

Then notice whether it says, “I am—” or “You are—” . . .

If it says, “I am—” change it to “You are—” as in the previous experiment. . . .

Next identify who is speaking to you in this way, and notice if you have an image of this person who is speaking to you. (If you can’t immediately identify whose voice this is, ask yourself, “If I did know, who would it be?”) . . .

Many people will spontaneously get an image of the speaker as a way to identify who it is. If you already have an image of them, notice what it is like to hear the same voice with or without this image. . . .

Usually a voice with an image will be farther away in physical location than a voice without an image. Even when this is not the case, your sense of separation is likely to be stronger, and your sense of who you are will feel more solid.

That image of the speaker will usually be seen outside the person. If that doesn’t happen spontaneously, say to yourself, “Can you remember when this person spoke to you in this way,” and you will usually see the other person outside yourself as you retrieve a memory of a specific event, in a specific context.

This image of the person who is speaking may be directly in front of you, or it may be somewhat off to the side, or less often even behind you. But wherever they are located, they will usually be facing toward you. Often your image of this other person will also be somewhat higher than you are, in a position of power or authority.

When they are facing you, there is an implicit message of conflict or confrontation, rather than cooperation; if they are higher than you, you will likely feel weaker and less powerful. Changing their location, the direction that they are facing, and their height in relation to you, can be used to indirectly change the conflict or confrontation into something more equal and cooperative, joining with it, rather than confronting it.

For instance, if you think now of a troublesome voice, and who it is that is
speaking to you in this way, notice where that person is located in your personal space, whether they are speaking toward you, rather than in some other direction, and if they are higher or lower than you are. . . .

Now change that person’s location from wherever you saw them, to being beside you at the same level, facing in the same direction, as if you were sitting together discussing something that is in front of both of you, and continue your verbal interaction with this person—what do they say now, and what do you say in response? . . .

Notice if this change to sitting together facing in the same direction makes any change in the content of what that person says, or the tone of voice that they use, and if there is any change in your feeling response to what they say. . . .

In this position usually that other person will become more cooperative, and less argumentative or confrontational. Their voice may become softer or slower, or they may be more willing to listen to what you have to say in response, and you may notice parallel changes in your own response. Your unpleasant feelings will likely become less intense, and they may also change in quality. For instance you may be confused rather than angry, or interested rather than annoyed. . . .

When you realize the impact of this kind of change in location, you can use it to change your response to a voice. Below is a particularly graceful way to do this, described by Andrew T. Austin in his wonderful book, The Rainbow Machine. (9)

One technique I use a lot that has produced some results that are sometimes as dramatic as the Core Transformation process (2) came from something a psychotherapist told me that sounds much like something Virginia Satir (8) might have done—maybe I read it in one of her books. In doing family therapy, she had a family where the conflict was between the father and his 17-year-old son. The father was a “strong” and stoical man, for whom expressing emotion was not an easy or desirable skill.

She told the son to get up and stand behind the seated father and gently place a hand on each of his father’s shoulders in order to “feel and relieve some of the tension there.” Apparently this made a huge change in the relationship between father and son, so naturally it got me thinking about how this could be used for an individual, when the father or someone else is not present.

As I have mentioned previously, the internal representations of problem people are rarely, if ever, radiating beauty and light. I’ll often ask what the expression on their face is, and what their posture is. Then I’ll ask the client to imagine walking behind that person and gently placing a hand on each shoulder and giving just a little gentle massage to loosen them up a
bit. As the client imagines touching them, this also shifts their kinesthetic feelings. Usually the representation itself changes, relaxes, or even starts crying. For instance:

Client: “I feel criticized.”

Therapist: “What has to happen inside for you to feel criticized?”

(Since criticism is a largely verbal activity. I could have asked, “And who criticizes you, and what do they say?”)

C: “I hear a voice.”

T: “And if that voice were a person, who would that be?”

C: “My father. My father was always criticizing me; he had a horrible voice like that.” (The client has not seen father for over 14 years.)

T: “And if your father were in the room now, where would he be?”

C: “Standing right in front of me, really close, facing me.”

T: “That’s right. Now close your eyes. I want you to imagine walking around behind him, and gently place one hand on each of his shoulders and gently massage those shoulders. Whisper into one ear that is close enough to hear you, to ‘Relax now. . . all the way.’. . . Tell him it’s OK, . . . it’s OK, . . . Give him a few moments to relax, all the way down now. . . .”

Try this now yourself; think of someone you felt inferior to as a child, and hold that representation in mind. Then stand up, go around behind them, and gently massage their shoulders and notice the difference. . . .

This is a nice maneuver that achieves several things simultaneously. Primarily it completely shifts the spatial orientation of the client in relation to the representation. Instead of facing each other in opposition, they become oriented in the same direction, with implications of alliance and cooperation. In addition, massaging someone’s shoulders and talking to them in this way presupposes a much more friendly relationship than criticism does, opening the door to a more understanding attitude.

One aspect of this is worth pointing out, as it isn’t always obvious at first. When you elicit a representation from a sitting client and then ask them to stand up, the representation tends to stay where it is in geographical space. A representation that is a negative artifact from childhood is often bigger, or higher up than the client, and because of this it often represents something more powerful than the client. However, when you stand up and massage someone’s shoulders, you are the same height, with implications of equality. And when you feel equal to someone else, you feel much less defensive and threatened. If that other person was originally sitting down, you may even find that you are higher than they are, with a corresponding feeling of power, instead of vulnerability.
In my early daze, I would try to get the client to reduce the size of the representation, or “push” it further away. Invariably they would find some kind of difficulty. Then I chanced upon the move described above, which is much more graceful and effective.

Essentially, this puts the client in control of the representation, and gets the representation to relax. The representation is exactly that—a representation of a part of himself, a bit of his own psyche that isn’t feeling nice. This is a hugely powerful technique. I prefer to have the client remain sitting and do this in their imagination. However, it isn’t unusual for someone to actually stand up and go through the physical motions of these activities. This is particularly likely if the client is an athlete, or someone else who attends closely to their body and its position in great detail. (9, pp. 80-81)

Once I was having lunch with a colleague at a national psychotherapy conference. She was talking about her 10-year-old son who was having some difficulties, and about her anxiety and uncertainty about him. When I asked her where she saw the image of her son, she looked and gestured straight ahead of her, and said, “About 15 feet away.” I asked her to bring this image of her son next to her, so that he was by her side, facing in the same direction. When she did this, her anxiety changed to soft tears of sadness about what he was going through, and then she said calmly and confidently, “I know what to do. All I have to do is be with him and support him.”

A particularly useful intervention that I learned from Robert Dilts can be used with a couple who are arguing vehemently. Ask them to sit side-by-side, with a little space between them, facing in the same direction. Then ask them to see both of themselves in front of them, and to continue to discuss their ongoing interaction in the moment, but in “third person,” as if they are describing someone else. “She is sitting with her arms folded across her chest, and he is feeling very angry right now, remembering all the times that—”

These examples may suggest other changes in position that could be useful to change the location of a representation of someone who has a troubling voice. What if you were both lying down side by side on chaise lounges enjoying the springtime sun? Or sitting back to back?

For much more about how to utilize changing the position of internal images of other people, see Lukas Derks’ excellent book, Social Panoramas. (13)

**Changing Volume**

When you changed the location of a negative voice so that it was farther away, you often found that the volume decreased, making it much less unpleasant to listen
to the voice. Changing the volume was a major factor in making the voice easier to listen to, and changing the location in space was a way to change the volume. But how does this work so easily?

You have had many experiences in the real world in which a sound source moved away from you, or you moved away from a sound, and as it did, the sound became quieter. You have also had many experiences in which a sound moved closer to you, or you moved closer to a sound and it got louder.

When you imagine a sound moving away, or that you are moving away from a sound, that elicits coordinated simultaneous memories in all your senses of that happening. The memories of the sound moving away correspond to a decrease in volume. In other words, remembering this kind of event elicits the precise internal neurology that occurred when that happened in the external world. That same neurology can be used to make a corresponding change in your internal world.

This kind of experience is called a “reference” experience; an experience in the external world that has the characteristics that you need to make a change in your internal world. Whenever you want to make a change, you can search for a memory of something happening in the external world that has the properties that you need in order to make the internal change. When you re-experience it fully, that will elicit the response that you had in the external world. As Richard Bandler has said, “Since most problems are created by our imagination and are thus imaginary, all we need are imaginary solutions.”

This understanding opens up a world of possibilities, which skilled hypnotists have been using for a century or more. For instance, if you want to lower the temperature in your hands, or to shrink the blood vessels in them, you can vividly imagine putting them in a bucket of ice water; if you want to raise the temperature of your hands, or dilate the blood vessels in them, you can imagine putting them into a bucket of hot water.

If your goal is to decrease the volume of a voice, you can think of many other contexts in which the volume changed as a result of some event, or something that you did. Pause now, to think of several other events in the real world (other than increasing distance) that decreased the volume of a sound or voice. . . .

Can you think of a time when someone was talking to you and then closed a door between you? Or drew a curtain? Or the person speaking to you turned away from you, or put their head under the covers? Or you covered your ears with your hands? If you were in a bathtub, submerging your ears would muffle the sound. You can use any experience like this to change volume, as long as it is something that you have experienced, preferably repeatedly.

There is a wonderful DVD (21) in which Michael Yapko helps a man with his life-long depression in a single session. The man’s depression was caused by his
memories of a childhood that was horribly abusive, both physically and verbally, and he had abusive and depressing internal voices as a result. One of Michael’s interventions is as follows (verbatim from the transcript):

When I have hundreds of people in a room, and I ask, “Who among you has good self-esteem?” hands go up—not many, but some hands go up. And then I ask them, “Do you have an inner critic? Do you have a voice inside your head that criticizes you and says rotten things to you, and puts you down, and says mean and horrible things to you?” And every single one says, “Yes.”

And I say to them, “If you have a voice that says rotten things to you, how can you have good self-esteem?” And the interesting reply—it’s always a bit different—but the common bottom line is they don’t listen to it. And when I ask them, “How do you not listen to it?” that’s when I learn all sorts of different strategies.

One person said, “Well, I picture it as on a volume control knob, and I just turn the volume down.

 Somebody else said, “I picture it as a barking dog, tied to a tree, and I just keep walking.”

 Somebody else says, “You know, I have another voice on my shoulder that says good things to me.”

 But the interesting thing is that every single person has that inner critic, that critical voice. It’s just a question of whether they listen to it or not. (21, p.17)

Earlier you experimented with changing the location, direction, and distance of a troublesome voice to make it much more comfortable to listen to. When you make these kinds of changes what you are actually doing is changing your relationship to the voice. This is something that you can do voluntarily any time you want, in order to have a more resourceful response to it, giving you some control over your experience. Since a change in location or direction is a pure process change, you can use it with any voice, or any sentence, phrase, or other set of words or sounds that a voice might say.

What you have been experimenting with are changes in aspects of a voice that are usually unconscious, but can become conscious if you ask the right kind of question. Once these choices are conscious, you can experiment with making changes in them. When you find a change that you are pleased with, you can then allow that change to become unconscious and automatic again, freeing your attention for other
things. You are taking the first small, yet significant, steps toward having more choice about how you think about and respond to events in your life.

**Two Very Important Warnings**

1. **Respect signals of objections or concerns**

   Earlier when you tried placing a negative voice in your stomach or your heart, you probably felt worse. That feeling was a clear signal that some part of you objected to that change, and that it wasn’t a useful thing to do. Some call this “intuition”; others call it “listening to your wiser self,” or some other such phrase. Whatever you call it, please pay attention to it and respect it. If you tried to ignore it or override it, that would be a mistake—and sometimes it would be a big mistake. You can try *any* experiment briefly for the purpose of learning, but when you make a change that feels worse, it is very important to respect that, and change the voice back to what it was like before the experiment, and try something else.

   You may also find that one of the changes that you made was not permanent, and that a voice spontaneously moves back to its original location, direction, or volume. This is often a signal that the change you made was not as useful as you might have consciously thought.

   At other times, you may find that a voice changes spontaneously, without your intention. As you were experimenting, some unconscious aspect of you discovered a useful change that you hadn’t thought of or intended. Always respect this kind of spontaneous change as a signal that some other aspects of your functioning are wiser than your conscious one.

2. **If the voice disappears**

   As you try these experiments—and the others in the chapters that follow—you may occasionally find that a voice entirely disappears, or you find a way to deliberately make it disappear—for instance, by moving the voice so far away into the distance that you can’t hear it at all.

   Sometimes when a voice disappears that is an indication that a voice has reorganized in some way so that it no longer needs to talk to you. Perhaps it has completely integrated into who you are in a useful way. When this happens, you will not only feel relief from what it has been saying, you will likely also feel an added wholeness, a feeling of being more than you were before.

   This experience of a troublesome voice disappearing—along with a greater feeling of wholeness—happens frequently in a process called “Aligning Perceptual Positions” developed by my wife Connnirae Andreas. This process uses location to sort out our different perceptions and organize them, resulting in personal integration and clarification. An article about this process can be found on my web site at: http://www.steveandreas.com/Articles/comaligning.html. A complete demonstra-
tion of this process is included in the DVD Training: “Core Transformation—the full 3-day workshop” available from RealPeoplePress.com.

However, at other times the disappearance of a voice may not be so useful. Despite its unpleasantness, often a voice has some very important information or protective function. If you lost the voice you would also lose that information or protection; you would lose a part of yourself, and possibly something that was very valuable. The voice may have been overcome, or smothered, or hidden, but not integrated, and it will likely emerge again later to cause trouble again.

In order to avoid this, I always like to bring the voice back in and find a location and direction that makes it possible to comfortably hear what it is saying. That way you can talk with it, and find out if the voice might still have some important message for you. If it does, you can continue to modify it in some way, using some of the other methods in this book. If the voice calmly tells you that it has nothing more to say to you, then you can safely allow it to disappear again. The overall goal of this book is to teach you how to transform a troublesome voice into something much more useful and supportive, not to eliminate it.

**Using location in a positive way**

You have experimented with how to change a troublesome voice in order to make it less impactful. That same information can be used in reverse to make a positive voice *more* impactful. For instance, you may have an inner knowing that says something like, “Whatever happens, I am a worthwhile person,” or “I know I am capable and resourceful.” If this voice is far away and quiet, and doesn’t sound very convincing to you, try moving it closer and making it louder. You could try putting that voice into your heart, your chest, or your belly, and find out if that produces a stronger feeling of truth and conviction. Or you can try any other change that you find increases the impact of that voice.

However, you need to be very careful when you do this, so please be very cautious, and extra sensitive to any concerns or objections. There can be some very significant problems with the words that you use, and I want you to know how to avoid these problems before you do much with adding or changing the words that you say to yourself.

For instance, if you have a supportive voice that is in opposition to a troublesome one, making the supportive one stronger can escalate the conflict, and that often causes problems. If a troublesome voice says “You’re stupid,” and you add a voice that says, “I’m smart,” those voices are in direct opposition.

However, if you add a voice that says, “I can learn how to be smart,” that voice is not in opposition, because a stupid person can learn to be smart. In fact the impli-
cation of “I can learn to be smart,” is that the person is not already smart, which is in agreement with the voice that says, “I’m stupid,” so there is no conflict.

Small changes in wording like this can be very important to avoid creating conflict. There are some very important criteria for the words that a resourceful voice says to make sure that it really works well to support you. When you learn what those are, you can make changes that won’t “backfire” or cause problems that could be worse than the one you wanted to solve.

Another possibility is to first transform a troublesome voice, and then strengthen a supportive one. Avoiding conflict not only makes change much more comfortable, it makes it much easier to do, and much more lasting and useful.

In later chapters we will return to using the information in this chapter positively. I will discuss many other ways to change what a voice says in great detail in later chapters, particularly chapter 10, “Asking Questions.” But first I want to explore several other simple ways to change nonverbal aspects of a voice, and its emotional impact on you. The first of these is to change the tempo or tonality.
Think of a simple sentence like, “I need to get going,” and hear it in your mind in an ordinary, everyday tempo. . . .

Now say the exact same sentence internally in a very fast tempo. . . .

Finally, say it in a very slow tempo, even slower than if you were about to nod off to sleep. . . .

Did you notice any difference in your response to that sentence in the different tempos? . . .

Most people will feel only a little motivated by the first, much more motivated by the second, and completely unmotivated by the last. Since the words spoken are exactly the same, this difference is solely a result of the change in tempo. But since most people only notice the words that they speak to themselves, this effect of tempo is usually completely unconscious.

In the real world, a fast tempo is usually paired with urgent situations in which we need to tense up and do something quickly, while slow tempos are typically associated with relaxation, rest, and leisure activities. Since we use our memories of those real-world events to construct our internal world, a fast tempo usually elicits tension and motivation, while a slow tempo elicits relaxation and repose. But if you had a parent who motivated you with dire threats in a slow voice, you might be very motivated by a slow tonality. Changing the tempo of an internal voice is another way to gain some control over the impact of what you say to yourself.

Recently I saw an older woman whose dearly loved husband had died two years ago, and she had been depressed ever since. I used our grief resolution process (4) with her, but it was only partly successful. A little exploration revealed that she
had an internal voice that was depressing her. In a low, slow voice, it said things like, “It doesn’t matter; things aren’t worthwhile; they don’t have any meaning anymore, because you’re just going to die anyway.” Try saying those words to yourself in a slow tempo, over and over again, and notice how they affect you. . . .

Now send that voice off into the distance, and “shake off” any depressed feelings by wiggling your body a bit and then remind yourself of something that you enjoy a lot. . . .

When I asked this woman to speed up the tempo of this voice, she immediately started chuckling, and said, “It became a hip-hop rapper voice.” Changing the tempo resulted in changing the tonality, and the words became somewhat ridiculous, lifting her depression.

Nick Kemp is a provocative therapist and hypnotherapist in England who has explored the use of voice tempo changes with his clients in great detail. He has originated and developed a detailed and dependable process for using tempo with anxiety and other intense and fast-paced uncomfortable states that is very widely useful. It is one of the methods that Nick includes in what he terms “The Provocative Change Works” set of tools.

**Internal Voice Tempo Change**

**Nick Kemp**

Whenever I see someone with a problem, I always ask myself the question, “How do they do that?” I began to realize that there are a number of elements that are very similar in a wide range of conditions, which on the surface may seem very different, but actually are not that different when taking a closer look at their internal structure. With many problems that create anxiety and tension, someone is talking to themselves in a fast tempo that creates and sustains their intense feeling response.

They are usually talking to themselves at such a fast tempo that they become hyper-alert and stimulated, and aren’t able to access other choices—rather like driving a car on the freeway while stuck in high gear, unable to change down into lower gears. At that fast speed, they lack choice; it’s not possible for them to exit and turn off onto side roads, or stop for lunch. Slowing down the tempo of their internal voice makes it possible to have choices that simply weren’t available to them when they were talking to themselves rapidly.

**Congruence Check: Asking for Objections**

Before beginning the exercise below, I do a thorough congruence check, to be sure it is appropriate to reduce or eliminate the anxiety or other unpleasant symptoms
that they feel. If someone has very good reason to be anxious, and their anxiety keeps
them out of dangerous situations, it would not be appropriate to change their feelings
until and unless they had some other way to protect themselves from that danger.

However, often there is no real danger, only a perceived or imagined danger,
or their response is to some past context, so the danger is no longer present. In order
to distinguish between these different possibilities, it is important to find out if there
are any positive outcomes that would be affected by eliminating the anxiety.

The simplest way to do this is to ask, “Does any part of you have any objection
to having a more comfortable response in all the situations in which you have
had these intense feelings?” Often an objection will emerge as an uncomfortable
feeling or nonverbal incongruence. At other times, it may appear as an image of a
potential problem, or a internal voice that is more explicit. “If I lost my anxiety,
others would expect me to take charge and be more responsible.” Any objection
needs to be satisfied before proceeding, or it will tend to interfere with the process.

Whenever you find an objection, one option is to simply stop what you are
doing until you have more experience with adjusting a voice, or until you have more
experience with satisfying an objection. This is the safest option, but it prevents you
from trying some changes that could be very useful.

Another option is to proceed with the process, with the full knowledge that any
change can be reversed if it turns out to be unsatisfactory. If you assure any objec-
tion—whether that is a vague feeling, or a more specific image or internal voice—that you agree reverse any change if it objects to it later, it can be comfortable trying
out a change to find out if it is satisfactory or not. This option is particularly useful
when an objection is not based on a specific perceived danger, but only on a some-
what vague fear of the unknown—what might happen if the change was made.

Other objections are much more specific. For instance, “If I lost my anxiety, I
wouldn’t get out of dangerous situations fast enough,” describes a protective func-
tion that needs to be respected. The simplest way to satisfy this objection would be
to agree to keep the anxious feeling in any contexts that are truly dangerous, while
exploring alternatives in other contexts.

Most anxiety doesn’t actually protect someone by keeping them out of a con-
text that is perceived as dangerous; it only makes them feel bad while they are in
it. For instance, many people are anxious about flying, but it’s not strong enough
to keep them from flying, it only makes them miserable when they are on a plane.
Once you have decided to risk getting on a plane, the anxiety is useless, so you may
as well feel comfortable.

Yet another way to satisfy an objection is to ask the objection how it could be
satisfied. “OK, you want to protect me from danger; how can you continue to pro-
tect me from danger, while allowing me to feel more comfortable?” In many ways
this is the best option of all, because it gives the objecting part the task of finding a solution. Since it knows most about exactly what it wants to protect you from, it is in the best position to propose an effective solution.

**Slowing Tempo Exercise Outline**

In the outline below, sentences in “italics” and quotes give the exact language that I use, with explanatory remarks in parentheses, or in plain text.

1. **Accessing the Internal Voice** “Now I know from what you have told me that up until this point you have experienced this intense feeling on a number of occasions. I’d like you to bring one of these times to mind now, and let me know what you are either thinking or saying to yourself at these times, just **before** the feeling occurs. You can do this either with your eyes open or closed. Most people find it easier with their eyes closed.”

   Notice that this language is more immediate and associated than, “Think of a time when—” which is more ambiguous, and could result in them thinking of an experience by seeing themselves in it, rather than being in the experience and re-experiencing what they feel when that happens. Or they might run through a listing process, scanning across different examples, but without stepping into any of them. Either of these alternatives would make it more difficult to hear what they are saying to themselves.

   Usually they are able to tell me immediately what they are saying to themselves, but sometimes they may have some difficulty. If they don’t know what they are saying to themselves, they may be too separated from the experience at the moment, and this is often visible in their nonverbal behavior—their body is relatively motionless, and they don’t look anxious. When this is the case, there are several choices.

   One choice is to use my language to help them re-associate into the experience. “When you are in that experience, what do you feel in your body? If you are sitting down, can you feel the shape, texture, and temperature of that particular chair, and your posture as you sit in it? If you are standing, can you feel how your feet contact the floor, and the position of your feet? Do you feel tense or relaxed, balanced or off balance?” Usually that will enable them to really be in that experience, making it easy to notice what they are saying to themselves.

   However sometimes it is easier to accept and utilize their separation from the problem experience by asking them to imagine that they could see an image of themselves in the problem context. “If I were to draw a picture of you in one of these experiences, as in a comic book, where the artist draws thought bubbles above each character’s head, what should I put in the bubble over your head to indicate what is being thought at that precise moment?”
Or you can use some version of the “as if” frame: “If you did know what you are saying to yourself in that situation, what might it be?” or simply, “That’s OK, just make up something.” Since I will be adjusting the tempo, not the content, the exact content of what the voice says is really not that important. It is only important that they come up with something that fits well for them in that situation.

Once they know what they are saying to themselves, I ask them to think of other situations in which they have their anxiety, and ask what they are saying to themselves in those. Typically it is either the same sentence, or one that is fundamentally similar, or has the same kind of presuppositions or implications—that they are about to die, or are in some kind of very difficult situation that they can’t handle, or that has very unpleasant consequences. By doing this, I am helping them to create a larger category of experiences in which they have the same feeling of anxiety. Then when I help them change the feeling in one of these, the change is much more likely to generalize to all the experiences in the category.

2. Noticing the Tempo “So the sentence you have said to yourself is, ’The plane is going to crash into the sea.’ When you have said this to yourself, do you say it in your normal conversational speaking voice, or do you say this at a faster tempo?”

Here I am offering the client just two options; most will immediately confirm that they are using a faster tempo of speaking. If they say it’s otherwise, I ask them to check; to date out of the more than 900 clients I have done this with, every one has been able to notice a much faster tempo.

3. Baseline Tempo “OK, now I am going to ask you to do three things. The first is to say or think this sentence exactly as you have done to date and notice how you feel in response to doing this.” . . .

4. Slowing Tempo by One Third “OK, now I am going to say your sentence, slowed down by about one third. After I have said it, I want you to say or think this sentence to yourself at this slowed-down speed and notice what’s different.” . . .

Then I say their sentence out loud and slowed down, and then pause while they say it internally in the same tempo. In order to slow down the tempo they have to change their physiology—slow their breathing, relax the tension in their vocal cords and chest, how they shape their words, etc.

5. Even Slower Tempo “OK, now I am going to say the same sentence even slower, and when I am done I want you to do the same, and let me know when you have done so.”

I then say the sentence out loud, and slow down the tempo dramatically, to demonstrate exactly what I want them to do. I allow at least two seconds between each pair of words, matching each word to their breathing out, so that each word is paired with the relaxation that naturally occurs when breathing out.
I watch them carefully to observe their increased tension as they anticipate when they will hear the next word, so that I can say the next word somewhat later than they expect. I pause even longer between the last two words of the sentence—at least double the length of the previous pauses. Then I pause to give them time to say the sentence in this slowed down tempo, and wait for them to tell me when they are done.

6. Testing “OK, now when you try to think of this as you used to, what are you noticing that is different?” Usually their feeling of anxiety will be entirely gone; sometimes it will be greatly reduced. The tempo shift deconstructs the meaning of the old sentence, and changes their response. Very rarely it may not change much—or at all—and I follow with the visual variation below.

Visual Variation Another way to do the same exercise is to ask them to see the sentence in front of them as they say it to themselves, translating it from the auditory to the visual.

“Now I want you to see that sentence out in front of you, as if it’s on a small billboard, and notice what the sentence looks like in detail. Tell me how far away from you it is, what size the letters are, whether they in bold face, italics, or regular type, etc.”

“Now I want you to begin to stretch the sentence apart, creating longer spaces in between the words, first noticing the new locations of the words, and then to attending to the spaces in between the words, rather than to the letters.” This further changes the meaning of the sentence, and is also a demonstration that they can voluntarily change their feeling response.

If the sentence has a negation in it, like “I can’t—” I have sometimes suggested that they, “Remove the apostrophe and the t in the second word of the sentence,” being very careful not to say the word that I am referring to. This reverses the meaning of the sentence entirely, and they find themselves able to do what they previously thought, “I can’t.” I often delete any other word that causes a problem, for instance, “And now take the fourth word, and do the same thing. Start to fade it out a little bit more, a little bit more. And then there’s a certain point where—pfff—white it out. So it’s not there. You know it’s not there, because when you look now, it’s not there.” When doing this it is important to not say the word, but only refer to it indirectly by its position in the sentence.

Kinesthetic tactile variation An additional variant is to ask the client to reach
out and feel the words and letters in front of them, as if the words are solid, and they could touch them with their fingers, translating from the auditory or visual systems to the kinesthetic. Then I ask them to use their hands and fingers to spread out the words—and then sometimes to also spread out the letters—and to feel the empty space between them.

In some cases I will ask them to run both the auditory and visual versions of this exercise at the same time, or to add in the kinesthetic aspect as well.

After doing this, it is imperative to do a thorough congruence check again, by carefully rehearsing and testing the new response in all the different contexts in which they previously had the old response. Any concerns or objections need to be respected and satisfied in order to preserve any other useful outcomes that may have been served by the old response. This could include keeping the old anxious response in certain contexts, to maintain the protection. Usually an even better solution is to elicit or teach some kind of coping behavior in those contexts that are still perceived as dangerous, so that they no longer need the anxious response.

The verbatim transcript that follows is from a session that I did recently with a professional trombonist who got anxious whenever he played in an orchestra. In this example, I utilize aspects of both the variations described above. The transcript begins with me talking to Fred (His name has been changed):

When people come to see me, they’re mostly in some kind of state of anxiety. They don’t come because they think, “What shall I do? I’ve nothing else to do. I know—I’ll just go and see Nick today.” (Fred: Yeah.) So they arrive with something, number 1. Number 2, it’s something that they’re doing over and over again, so no matter how much they’ve thought about it, they don’t feel any different. (Fred: Right.) So they’ve got to the point when they decide to see me, they’re really thinking, “You know what, I’ve got to do something different.” (Fred: Yep.) So everything’s reached a bit of a boiling point. (Fred: Yeah.)

Now most of the time, what they’re experiencing is the end—the final behavior at the end of the sequence. So, the final behavior is, you know, doing this. And before you get to that, you have how a person feels. And before you get to the feeling, you have what happens here, which is what they’re thinking, and how they’re thinking about it. Because you can’t just get a feeling. (Fred: No.) You know, if I said to you, “I want you to feel wildly enthusiastic,” but you’re not allowed to picture anything, look at anything, think anything to yourself, or hear anything, you can’t get from the state that you’re in to that state. (Fred: No, no.) There’s got to be some translation here. (Fred: Yeah.) So here’s the good news:

In order to change the final result, you’ve got to change this stuff up here. (Fred: Yeah.) So it’s the way in which you think and how you think that creates the
feeling, that then creates the end behavior. (Fred: Right.) So, we’ll explore some of that. Now, somebody goes to somebody, and they get some kind of relief for a short period of time, then usually that means it’s not been contextualized enough. So the person feels totally relaxed during the session and goes, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, all is well,” etc. etc.

And they go away and then they go, “OK, what’s the first number? (Fred laughs.) Stravinsky’s Firebird. Damn.” And you start thinking to yourself, “Is it gonna go well? Is it gonna go well?” And then, “Oh, well, now I’m starting to run the anxiety program.” Think this in anxious voice, probably a fast anxious voice, start to get a feeling which could be here or here (gesturing toward his chest and belly area.) then start to think, now you’re feeling anxious, then you start to think, usually predictive things, “What if?” or future tense, or future case things. All anxiety’s into anticipation. Now, I’m not even in the orchestra; I’m already feeling anxious. (Fred: That’s right. Yeah.) I’m running through my head scenarios of different things. Now I’m thinking, “Maybe I could just run.” (Fred laughs loudly.)

So, the states that people crank up, in terms of their feeling states, are through the process. The secret is to unravel the process, so the person can get what’s appropriate for them. Because it’s all very nice and delightful for someone to say, “Hey, a bit of adrenaline is no bad thing.” And you go, “Step into my head for a day (Fred: Yeah.) and see how that feels, and then tell me if that’s the same thing.” (Fred: Yeah.)

Because if you’re sitting there thinking, uhhhh, over and over again in the same way, then as somebody who is a performer and who’s measured on their final ability to perform, I know that this is like, “I can get through it.” But I don’t want to be sort of like, you know, sort of “just getting through it.” I want to be enjoying what I’m doing. (Fred: Yeah, absolutely.) Because, chances are, if you’re doing it in rehearsals, exactly the same music, exactly the same plays, even if you’re sitting in the same seat in the same theater, with the same conductor and the same musicians, it would be absolutely fine—because you’re not running the same process. (Fred: Yeah, Yeah.) Sound familiar?

Fred: Absolutely correct, on all counts. (Fred laughs.)

Nick: Somebody said to me, “How did you know that?” I said, “Well, just luck.” Well, also, once you’ve seen your first thousand clients, then you realize there’s really only going to be a few things. Well, let’s just—I have an instinct over how you’re doing this. And, as I said to one client, “I wouldn’t want to bet against me, because I’m usually right.” (Fred laughs.) So, the sort of things that you think to yourself are: Is it going to go well? That’s one that you mentioned. What other things are going through your head?

Fred: (taking a deep breath) I unconsciously sort of think about sitting there and the worst things happening—
Nick: (overlapping) Like what? Forgot to get dressed?
Fred: —notes not being produced— Well, no, not that. (laughter)
Nick: The job is a trombone, not a triangle; that could be really problematic.
Fred: Just, just, you know, not being to produce notes or splitting notes, not producing very well, or just the anticipation of sitting there almost frozen with nerves, really.
Nick: OK, these are all descriptions of what could happen. What I’m interested in is—just close your eyes for a second. Now, pick one of the times when you had the anxiety in the past. Now what I’m interested in is, “What—first person—is going through your head? So if I was going to draw a cartoon of you, and write some bubbles above your head, what do I actually put in the bubbles that Fred is thinking to himself?
Fred: “Oh shit, I don’t wanna be here.”
Nick: “Oh shit, I don’t wanna be here.” All right. Now, is that a familiar phrase?
Fred: Umm, yes, I think it is really.
Nick: OK. And keep your eyes closed, and just check. Is it said in an anxious kind of thought, in an anxious kind of a voice, and a quick kind of a voice? Just say, “Yes.” (Fred: Yes, it is.) Saves time really, it’s like a rhetorical question. OK, so keep your eyes closed. Because the first thing we’re going to do is to start sorting some of this out. So think it as you have thought it: “Oh shit, I don’t wanna be here,” in that same quick, anxious kind of voice that you have up until now used. . . . And when you think it to yourself like that, what do you notice?
Fred: Tension.
Nick: OK. And where do you notice the tension?
Fred: In my arms, and—
Nick: Where else?
Fred: Chest. Arms. Pretty much all over.
Nick: Where does it start, the tension?
Fred: In the chest area.
Nick: And where does it go to? . . . Does it go to the head?
Fred: Well, down the arms and up to my lips.
Nick: All right, we’ve got two things to work on here. Let’s start with the first one. So when you think at the moment, “Oh shit, I don’t want to be here” in that way, you notice it triggers the feeling. (Fred: Yeah.) Yeah? OK. So, take a deep breath in, and feel your feet flat on the floor. The next thing I want you to do is I want you, Fred, to imagine that we’re reading out of a play. So instead of how you used to think it, I want you to think it like this: You’re just reading out of a script which is, (flat voice) “Oh shit. I don’t wanna be here.” And just do that one time. Let me know you’ve done it. . . .
Fred: Umhm.
Nick: OK. Now I want you to think it like a question. So think it like this: “Oh shit. I don’t wanna be here?” (rising inflection) Run it through one time, . . . and let me know when you’ve done it.
Fred: Umhm.
Nick: Now I’m going to slow down the phrase. So I’m going to put big, big gaps in between each and every word. So it’ll seem like there’s a pause, because there is a pause, in between each and every word. And then I want you to think it at that same slowed-down speed. And I’ll say it first and I want you to think the whole phrase. Just take your time, and do it like this: (Each space is 2-3 seconds.) “Oh . . . shit! . . . I . . . don’t . . . wanna . . . be . . . . . . . . . here.” Now slow it down to that speed. . . . (long pause)
Fred: Umhm.
Nick: OK. Now, I want you to see the phrase as if it was on a billboard in front of you. So you can see the phrase, “Oh . . . shit! . . . I . . . don’t . . . wanna . . . be . . . . . . . . . here.” And get it so that you can see each word, and you can see each word clearly. And let me know when you can see it clearly at the moment. . .
Fred: Yeah.
Nick: Now begin to create a little bit more space between the “Oh” and the “shit,” and then each and every other word. So every word is a little bit more spaced out than every other word. Just quickly run through them, so they all start to space out a little bit more. So, the first two words, and then the second two, and then the “I” and the “don’t,” and the “wanna,” and the “be” and the “here.”
Fred: Yeah.
Nick: OK. Now, take the first two words, and begin to just start to fade them out. You know when things fade out, they just get fainter and fainter and fainter, . . . and then suddenly—pffft—you white them out so they’re not there. And you’ll know when they’re not there, because when you look, they’re not there. And now take the fourth word, and do the same thing. Start to fade it out a little bit more, a little bit more. And then there’s a certain point where—pffft—white it out. So it’s not there. You know it’s not there, because when you look now, it’s not there. (Fred: Umhm.) And take a deep breath in, and relax back into the space that’s now there, instead. And as you feel your feet flat on the floor, you can notice now, and every time you listen back to this, just what it is that you notice about what it is you notice that’s different. Now, as you try and think about the original phrase like you used to think about it, what do you notice?
Fred: There’s only four more words on the billboard.
Nick: OK. And when you think about the phrase, what effect does it have?
Fred: It’s quite relaxing.
Nick: It’s quite relaxing. Now if you try and think about it like you used to think about it, what do you notice?
Fred: It doesn’t have much— It doesn’t have any significance.
Nick: “It doesn’t have any significance.” Now if you think about the time in the past when you used to think about this, in this new way, what do you notice?
Fred: It’s just a memory really. Feels good, really.
Nick: “It’s just a memory.” OK. Now, what other phrases or things have you thought to yourself that have not been very helpful?
Fred: “Please let me play well tonight.”
Nick: “Please let me play well tonight.” OK. What other ones? . . . Do you say, “Is it gonna go well?” could be one of them?
Fred: Yeah.
Nick: OK. So let’s just do the same thing with “Is it gonna go well?” Notice, to start with, it’s a question. So, it’s a questioning about whether it’s gonna go well or not. Now let me just check: Is it an anxious voice, and is it a quick voice? Just say, “Yes.”
Fred: Yes.
Nick: OK. Now do the same thing. Slow it down so that it’s like it’s out of a play. “Is it gonna go well?” Then, make it overtly a question. “Is it gonna go well?” (rising inflection) Then slow down the phrase so there’s a big gap in between each and every word. So . . . everything . . . just . . . slows . . . . . . . down. Run it all the way through. Let me know when you’ve done it . . .
Fred: Yeah.
Nick: OK. Now see it as a piece of text, but this time just fade out the first three words. Just start to fade them out more and more and more and more, and then at a certain point—pfft—white them out. So they’re not there in the same way. And you’ll know they’re not there, because when you look they’re not there.
Fred: Yeah.
Nick: Now, if you take a deep breath in and sit back in your chair, when you try to think about that phrase, what do you notice?
Fred: I just see “go well.”
Nick: “Go well.” . . . And what effect does that have?
Fred: Enlightening, really.
Nick Kemp www.nickkemp.com

Commentary and Warning
Recently a friend of mine in another state called me asking for suggestions to help a new friend of hers who had had trouble sleeping for 16 years, and had become an alcoholic as a result of using alcohol daily to try to relax. I offered her quite a
number of things to try, including an outline of Nick’s changing tempo process. Most of the things I had suggested were not useful for her friend, so she decided to try the tempo shift. Here is her report, which she sent me a couple of weeks later.

We did the visualizing and listening to his self-statement more slowly and with more space between the letters and words. With that, I visibly saw his body and breathing change—despite the very negative content of his self-statement. That night he slept significantly better, and he has been sleeping beautifully since then—falling asleep immediately, and sleeping eight hours a night. He also stopped drinking on his own at the same time, and has been sober since then. He says that he never knew he could feel so good every day, and realized that he had spent the last 16 years hung over and fatigued.

As a result of this very brief intervention this man made a huge change in his life, sleeping well for the first time in 16 years, and stopping the daily use of alcohol. My friend wrote further:

One of the side effects of his drinking and fatigue was that he was hyped up/manic a little bit each day, and now he isn’t. Instead he is calm—and a little bored I think—and he says he is “waiting” for his hyped-up persona to come back. I don’t know if that truly is part of who he is when he is sober, or if it was purely a side effect of being alcoholic. He hasn’t been sober since he was a kid, so he doesn’t know the answer to that either.”

I don’t know if you notice the warning signals in this second paragraph. “‘waiting’ for his hyped-up persona to come back” clearly indicates a loss of a large part of his self-concept, his identity. Whenever someone makes a significant change that involves a loss of identity, that is much more pervasive than a change in behavior. They need something to fill the void created by the loss of identity. Some people can find a way to do that on their own, but others need some help. I immediately emailed her and warned her about this, but by then it was too late for her to do anything about it. Here is her later report:

I agree with you about him needing to find something else to do to fill the gaps caused by stopping drinking (and all the activities he stopped in order to stay sober), but he was unable to do that. In fact, at a couple of points he went on rants about how hobbies and activities “just for fun” were a waste of time and something he had no interest in. I tried directing him
toward something that would add value to his life, service-oriented activities that centered around things he already liked.

Soon after that, he started to fill his time with more work, which was the only thing he felt had value. Then he ended up with four days off from work, and he was absolutely beside himself. His moods became unstable—very manic and hyper one minute, crashed out in bed the next. His cravings for alcohol became unmanageable, his inner critic turned way up, and it also turned against me, and some of his other housemates.

It was becoming extremely stressful to be around him, and at some point I brought up a conversation about needing him to respect my things and to also speak to me respectfully without swearing at me, because both were becoming a big problem, and he went off the deep end with extreme overreaction. I was shocked by his reaction; he was nearly foaming at the mouth, shaking, screaming, swearing, turning red, and took anything I had ever said during our friendship and interpreted it as a criticism and turned it inside out as if I were his worst enemy ever.

He also took every self-criticism—things no one else or I had ever criticized him for—and turned it around and accused me of thinking those terrible, demeaning things of him. He was so upset he couldn’t even look at me and I couldn’t de-escalate him except by leaving. He gave me the cold shoulder for the next few days whenever I saw him, and he put in a request at work to not have any time off indefinitely. I have not spoken to him since this incident. I have run into him around town and he starts pacing, tapping his foot, and speaks extremely animated to those around him. And, of course, having run into him, I know he isn’t getting the workload he was wanting, and I have heard from friends that he has been drinking heavily, blacking out, forgetting commitments. At this point, it feels too volatile for me, so for my own sanity I am staying out of his way.

Usually you can use the tempo shift to make a significant and useful change that will fit well with all the other aspects of your life, particularly when you do a careful congruence check before using this process. But whenever someone makes a really big change that involves a lot of their life you need to check carefully to see if something else needs to be done. This is almost always the case with stopping the long-term use of drugs. In this case there was stopping using the drug—which involves much more than stopping the drug itself, but also all the activities involved with that—buying the drug, using the drug with friends, the lifestyle associated with that, etc. But there was also the loss of that part of his identity, which left a vacuum—“If I’m no longer an alcoholic, who am I—and what do I do?”
In retrospect, it would have been much better to change the content of this man’s critical voices—the words that he said to himself—first. If that had been done, they would not have rebounded to torment him after his loss of identity, and they could have assisted him in creating a new life for himself in the vacuum created by the change.

Whenever you offer someone a change, you really need to do a congruence check to be sure the change is useful, and doesn’t create as many—or more—problems than they originally had.

**Changing Tonality Directly**

Most of us in the US are not very attuned to tonality, unless it is very obvious. By “tonality,” I mean any changes in the pitch, melody, timbre, hesitations, accent, etc.—any change in the sound of a voice other than location, volume, or tempo. In contrast, the English are very attuned to tonality, primarily because of the importance of distinguishing different social classes, which are indicated by their different regional accents. Asian languages, with their tonal aspects, require speakers of those languages to become sensitized to fine auditory distinctions, but American English does not.

Since we tend to ignore subtle tonal patterns or shifts, and much of our auditory experience is processed unconsciously, we often react to certain tones and tempos without realizing it. After talking to someone, sometimes I find that I am somewhat “down,” while other times I find myself feeling quite cheerful. If I review the previous conversation, I can often discover that it wasn’t the content of the conversation that I was responding to, but the tone of voice that was used.

This is also true of the tonalities that we use when we talk to ourselves internally. If we become more sensitive to these tonal aspects of our internal voices, we can learn to change them, and have more choice in how we respond.

When you experimented earlier with changing the location, volume, or tempo of a voice and noticing how it changed its impact on you, you may have found that sometimes the tonality of the voice also changed. In the example that I gave at the beginning of this chapter, when the depressed woman changed the tempo of her internal voice, the tonality changed as well, and that was what actually changed her response.

Usually it is easier to change tonality indirectly, by changing the location, volume, or tempo, and find out if there is a spontaneous tonality shift. However, you can also try changing tonality directly, to find out if that changes your feeling response to what a troublesome voice says to you. Unless you are a trained musician, this is a bit more difficult to describe, because most of us don’t have a good way to specify a tonality. One way around this problem is to talk about using a different national or regional accent.
One of the first steps in learning any discrimination is to experiment with polar opposites, or other experiences of great contrast. We can begin with noticing how we respond to large differences, and then gradually learn to make finer and finer discriminations, and find words to describe them.

First listen to a troublesome voice and notice both the words that it says, and the tonality it uses.

Next, hear the same words in several different “foreign” accents in turn—British, Mexican, Chinese, Norwegian, African, Russian, Italian, Swedish, Japanese, Portuguese—or any other accent that you are familiar with. Then you can try different regional US accents—Southern belle, New York taxi driver, Texas drawl, New England twang, California laid back, etc. Notice if any of those tonalities change your response to what the voice says.

Some of these may change your response to a voice in a way that is not useful, while others may have very little impact. But whenever you find an accent that changes your experience in a useful way, pause to make a mental note to use this accent for this voice in the future.

Another way to experiment with tonality is to think of different people you know: someone who is very easily excited, and someone who is always calm, someone who is uncertain, and someone who is always very certain, someone who is guarded and cautious, someone willingly takes risks, someone who tends to exaggerate, someone who often minimizes, someone who often lies or only tells part of the truth, etc. Hear the same words that your voice says in these different tones of voice, and notice if any of these change your response to what the voice says.

Again, some of these may change your response in a way that is not useful, while others may have very little impact. But whenever you find an accent that changes your response to this voice in a useful way, pause to make a mental note to use this accent in the future.

Now hear the same words in a questioning tone of voice, a commanding tone, a tone of amazement, a tone of puzzlement, or as if someone were reading the words from a written script, or any other tone that you would like to try.

Again, some of these may change your response in a way that is not useful, while others may have very little impact. Whenever you find a tone that changes your response in a useful way, pause to make a mental note to use this accent in the future.

Different tonalities have different meanings for us. Exactly which tonal elements cue these meanings, and exactly what those meanings are, might be very difficult to describe, because they are largely unconscious, and most of us don’t have a good vocabulary to describe them. Luckily, this isn’t necessary, because all
you have to do is to experiment with different tonalities, and discover how they change your response and which are most useful to you.

Up to now, we have been changing different nonverbal aspects of a voice in order to make it less troublesome. Next we will explore how to leave a troublesome voice unchanged, but *add* something else to it in order to change your response to it.
Up to this point, we have been changing different nonverbal aspects of a voice in order to change your response to it. Now we turn to different ways to add to your experience in order to change your response to a voice. A general principle in NLP is to never subtract experience; always add to it. Subtracting experience reduces your choices and abilities; adding experience increases them.

Instrumental music has been used for thousands of years to elicit feeling states in people—martial music to march off to war, lullabies to help children relax and go to sleep, romantic tunes to woo a lover, and on and on.

Music is processed primarily in the right hemisphere of a right-handed person’s brain, the hemisphere that does not process language, so it is less conscious, and less subject to your conscious control. If you deliberately choose to hear music internally that evokes the kind of feelings that you want to have more of, you can have more control over how you feel.

For example, Richard Wagner’s “The Ride of the Valkyries” is a stirring and triumphant piece of opera music that celebrates the transportation of fallen heroes to heaven. Over half a century ago, I had a series of experiences that paired meeting a challenge—with no further time to prepare—with hearing this music played at full volume—and from many sources, and out of synchrony. Ever since then, whenever I am facing a challenge, that music automatically begins playing in my head, creating a very positive state that supports my efforts to meet that challenge. Whatever else was going on in my life “takes a back seat” as I focus completely on what needs to be done.

Very early in the development of NLP, someone discovered that thinking of a
problem, and then adding in loud circus music helped some people have a different attitude toward their problem. Rather than being mired in their difficulty, they could think of it as if it were another stunt in a circus—something to observe with interest and excitement.

However, others who added circus music to a problem became angry, because thinking of their problem as another circus stunt did not fit their world at all. Although changing their response from the problem state to anger showed that the music made a significant change in their response, it was not a change that was useful to them, or that they enjoyed. Adding a particular kind of music may or may not fit with someone—unless, of course, they choose it themselves.

If you think about a problem that you experience fairly often—getting depressed, feeling slighted by others, angry, anxious, overwhelmed, or whatever, you can ask yourself, “What kind of music would change my state in a useful way?” . . .

If you frequently get somewhat “down,” or depressed, would a lively gypsy tune or a folk dance bring you “up” again? Or would a thousand violins playing a slow dirge exaggerate how you are feeling, making it seem a bit ridiculous, and less serious or overwhelming? If you experiment with different kinds of music, you can find some pieces that will be useful in changing your state in a way that is useful to you.

Think of a problem mood that you slip into repeatedly, and would like to have more choice about. . . .

Now think of some music that might possibly be useful to pair with this mood, and hear this music in your mind. . . .

As you continue to hear the music, think of a time when you felt this problem mood strongly, and notice what happens. . . .

Then try a different piece of music, and another, . . . until you find one that shifts your mood in a useful way. . . .

Then make a mental note to play this music in your head at those times in order to offer you more choice. . . .

Most psychiatrists think of compulsive hand-washing as a problem that is very difficult to treat. Below is a lovely example of using a meaningful piece of music to quickly change this problem in a single brief session. This example was sent to me about a year ago by Ron Soderquist, an NLP-trained hypnotherapist in the Los Angeles area.

Anxious parents called, each in turn, about their 17-year-old daughter Bev, who for the past six months had obsessively washed her hands 3-4 hours a day. Both parents reported they had “tried everything,” including counseling and drugs. They were so desperate they were now exploring
hypnosis, about which they were very skeptical. Somewhat worn down by their skepticism I said to the anxious mother, “Look, because you are desperate and because you worry that once again you will be throwing money away, I will offer you a complimentary consultation. I will evaluate your daughter’s symptoms and only schedule a therapy session if I believe I can help her.” With this assurance, she made an appointment.

As family members settled into their chairs, they all appeared relaxed. They communicated with ease, and there were no overtones of hostility. Turning to the girl I asked about school and extracurricular activities. She immediately replied, “I have studied piano for many years and enjoy it very much.” Because I play both classical and ragtime piano, this was a natural opening for building rapport.

When I asked about her favorite composer, she quickly said, “Chopin.” Because Chopin is also my favorite, we were now in perfect sync. We agreed we both loved Chopin’s Nocturnes and we both played most of them. I asked about her favorite and she hummed the melody. I said, “When I practice a nocturne in the evening I often can hear that melody in my head all next day,” and she nodded in agreement. “You can hear that melody right now, can’t you?” I said. She smiled and slipped into a nice little trance. As she did so, I ventured, “Perhaps, when you get the urge to wash your hands, you might enjoy turning on that nocturne instead.” I observed her trance deepen as she considered this, and then she nodded her head and said quietly and confidently, “I can do that.”

After some further rehearsal, and talk about other matters, I concluded the session. I didn’t suggest another session. The mother wondered, “Do we need to make an appointment for Bev?” I looked at Bev as I said, “Perhaps she has already found a solution,” and Bev nodded her head.

A week later the mother called to say Bev was doing fine. I was a little annoyed with myself for solving the problem when I should have held back and scheduled a regular appointment with a fee. But I just couldn’t help myself; it was too much fun just to do it. And while there was no fee, I did get a good story, and the mother soon referred a friend.

When I followed up some months later, I asked for more details of what she experienced internally. She said that when she got stressed, she first “felt germs on my hands, and then pictured them on my hands. Then the voice in my head that said, ‘You have germs on your hands. You have to wash them.’ went faster and louder and got more intense. When I turned on the nocturne, I would usually just hear the music, but sometimes I would imagine myself playing it.”
Bev was already talking to herself in a way that made her feel bad, and that bad feeling triggered her hand-washing. The Chopin nocturne was powerful in eliciting a positive state in which she had no urge to wash her hands. If Ron had added some cheerful words, that could have created conflict. However, adding instrumental music does not create conflict, because the music does not have any words to contradict what she was saying to herself. In addition, music is processed by the opposite brain hemisphere than the one used to process language, so any conflict would be between the hemispheres, rather than within one of them. Adding any music without words is a fairly safe intervention, especially if the person chooses the music that they think might be appropriate—and tests to find out how well it works.

Some readers might think that this example was a unique case, but it is actually fairly common. Ron sent me a report about another client he saw recently.

A 30-year-old male who had hung out in his bedroom for several months, couldn’t drive a car etc. because of panic attacks, was brought in by his stepmother. He was too anxious to leave the back seat of his car, so I went out and started the session beside him in the back seat—a first for me! He was creating his anxiety with a habitual internal voice: “You’re going to go ‘weird’”—which was what he called having a panic attack. He’s a guitar player, so together we found an alternate audio, a “favorite riff” that triggered his confident musician self. (I told him the Bev story while he was searching for a trigger for his confident self, and this seemed to strike a chord with him (pardon the pun). After we practiced that for a while (I did get him into my office) he went off with his stepmother. I called the next day and he had been out hiking and feeling great, using his favorite riff to keep his musician self in charge.

Adding a Song

So far we have only been making changes in the nonverbal aspects of your experience, without changing the words that an internal voice says. This changes your response without changing or challenging the words that a troublesome voice says. Next we are going to begin to experiment with adding words to change your experience of a troublesome voice. We will begin our experimentation with adding a song, which has both verbal and nonverbal aspects. This is a bit more complex than changing nonverbal aspects alone, because the words of the song may oppose what the troublesome voice says.

If you have two voices in opposition to each other, that will create conflict. Most people have enough conflicts to begin with; we really don’t want to add to that! So
in the exploration that follows, be especially attentive to any response that indicates that some aspect of you objects to what you are doing, and respect that by stopping. You can try something a little different until you find something that no part of you objects to.

Everyone knows how a song, a jingle, a phrase, or some other auditory experience can get stuck in your head, playing endlessly, and often annoyingly. Trying to stop it is typically not effective. In fact that usually makes it stronger, because as we try to stop it, we devote even more attention to it, when what we want is to pay less attention to it.

The trick is to choose something that is more useful to you than whatever is repeating annoyingly, and a really good choice is some song that has a desired effect on your feelings. You can think of some song that has a positive effect on you, and deliberately sing it to yourself over and over, until it becomes an unconscious background music, a sort of “mantra.”

One of my favorite songs for this is “I’m sitting on the top of the world.” Another is “I got plenty of nothing,” from Gershwin’s musical *Porgy and Bess*. Another, sung by Rita Coolidge, I have forgotten the title of, but the lyrics go, “You can do whatever, . . . you want to do whatever, . . . you want to, and you’ll never die.”

It doesn’t matter what song you choose, as long as it elicits a feeling state that you find uplifting or mood changing in a way that you like. A song is a great way to establish and maintain a mood early in the day, and it can also change your mood when you find yourself in a mood that you don’t like.

Pause now to think of a troublesome mood that you have experienced repeatedly.

Now think of a song that you find powerful and uplifting, and that you think could be a useful way to change this troublesome mood.

As you continue to hear the song, think of a time when you felt this problem mood strongly, and notice what happens.

Then try a different song, and another, and another, . . . until you find one that shifts your mood in a useful way.

Once you have found a song that you find useful, deliberately sing it to yourself for a while, until it becomes automatic. If you don’t know the words or melody well enough to do this, find them and practice them, so that you can. Once you have done this, all you have to do is start singing the song and it will continue on its own as a background as you turn your attention to other things. When you pause from attending to those other things, you can notice that song playing quietly in the background of your mind, maintaining your good mood.

You can also take a further step to make this connection even more automatic. If you periodically get into an unpleasant mood in certain situations, or in response
to certain external cues, your can imagine being in that situation, noticing those cues. Then turn on the song that you have chosen, to connect it to the situation and cues, so that they automatically trigger the song. Rehearse this several times right now, and then check later to find out if it has already become automatic, or if you need to practice it some more until it does. . . .

In the earlier part of this chapter, we added music alone, but a song is usually even more powerful, because it has both words and music. Music is processed in one hemisphere of your brain, while the words are understood by the other hemisphere, simultaneously activating both hemispheres with different aspects of the same message. This makes it much more powerful than either the melody or the words would be alone.

**Caution**

As mentioned earlier, when you add a song to your experience, the words of the song may be in opposition to whatever you are already saying to yourself. For instance, if you have been saying to yourself something like, “Everything is going to hell,” and you add the song, “I’m sitting on top of the world,” those two messages are contradictory. This has a potential for creating conflict, and we don’t want to do that.

Sometimes when I first sing a song with words that are significantly different from my current mood, it seems artificial, or I have tears resulting from the conflicting moods, but often the song quickly takes over and my mood changes.

However, if you experience some discomfort, conflict or incongruence that does not resolve quickly when you add a song, please respect that, and stop what you are doing. You could try choosing another song that doesn’t create conflict. Or you could delay using this approach until you have learned how to add words to your experience without creating this kind of conflict. This will be a major topic in many of the following chapters. Next we will begin to explore some specific ways to talk to yourself that avoid causing conflict.
Try saying the sentence, “What else can I enjoy right now?” to yourself, and notice how it changes what you attend to, and how you feel in response.

That sentence directs your attention toward what you can enjoy in the present moment, rather than the complaints and problems that so often occupy our attention and make us feel bad. Even in the worst situation there is always something to enjoy, so this instruction never contradicts your reality. And it also doesn’t contradict any grumpy voice that is complaining about all the nasty stuff. It doesn’t oppose it by saying “but,” it just directs your attention to other aspects of your experience, saying “and,” joining what a critical voice might be attending to with noticing what you can enjoy. If you say that sentence repeatedly until it becomes an unconscious mantra it can reorient your life.

Contrast can often clarify and deepen your understanding of how things work. Notice what happens if you replace the word “enjoy” with “criticize,” “disparage,” or “be disgusted by” or some other negative word or phrase, just for a short time to notice what that is like.

That sentence directs your attention in a very different way, and could easily result in plenty of unhappiness, or even depression. Many depressed people talk to themselves in this way without realizing it. Attending to what you don’t like results in unpleasant feelings; attending to what you can enjoy results in pleasant feelings.

But there is another subtle aspect of the sentence “What else can I enjoy right now?” This becomes apparent if you delete the word “else,” to get “What can I enjoy right now?” Try saying this sentence to yourself repeatedly, and notice how
you feel in response, and how that is different from how you feel in response to the same sentence with “else” in it. . . .

The sentence “What can I enjoy right now?” has a very different effect, because it implies that you aren’t enjoying anything right now—even though that is not a logical consequence of the statement. Most people will respond to this implication by feeling the opposite of enjoyment. When I say this sentence to myself, the tonality is slower and the pitch is lower, and I feel a heaviness, lethargy, somewhat depressed, because it sounds a little like a teacher telling me what I should do.

The word “else” in the first question presupposes that you are already enjoying something. So you naturally feel some enjoyment—as your attention searches for something else to enjoy. What a difference a single word can make!

And of course you can replace “enjoy” with any other verb that indicates what you want more of in your experience—learn, love, appreciate, see more clearly, understand, etc. Try saying to yourself, “What else can I learn right now?” repeatedly to see how that directs your attention, and how you respond. . . .

Now pick another verb to put in the place of “learn” to find out what that is like. . . .

And then do the same with “love” or some other words, and discover what that is like. . . .

Affirmations

Many people advocate repeatedly saying positive affirmations to themselves, as a way to change their beliefs about themselves and improve their lives. Affirmations originated with Emile Coué (1857-1926) who advocated saying the following sentence repeatedly, until it became an unconscious background mantra: “Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better.”

There is a serious problem with this particular affirmation in the repeated word, “every.” It will never be true that every day and every way I am getting better. Reality just isn’t like that. Even if I am getting marvelously better in many ways, it won’t be in all ways. Most of us have an internal voice that listens for universal statements and challenges them—and those who don’t have that kind of voice would be better off having one! If I say Coué’s statement to myself, it stimulates my internal voice to find the exceptions to that universal generalization. It might say sarcastically, “Yeah, right! How about the way you snapped at your wife this morning—is that better? How about that sore knee that flared up yesterday, so that you’re hobbling around this morning—is that better? I don’t think so.”

So even if the idea of affirmations might be worth pursuing, we need to be very careful about the words that we say to ourselves, or they may backfire and produce
opposite results. Any universal words, like “all,” “every,” “always,” will usually stir up an antagonistic voice, and that may result in decreasing your optimism! But there are other problems with affirmations that may not be immediately apparent. One web site says the following about affirmations:

The idea behind these techniques is pretty simple. Most of us grow up learning to put ourselves down for any real or imagined error. We grow up believing certain things about ourselves or comparing ourselves negatively to others. The use of positive affirmations is a technique to change that negative self-talk into something more positive.

The goal of having internal voices that are positive sounds very attractive. However, if we examine this prescription a little closer, the idea of adding positive affirmations presents a few problems. If we assume, as the quote does, that most of us “grow up learning to put ourselves down for any real or imagined error” what will happen when we introduce a new voice that is positive and supportive? There will be inevitable conflict between these opposite views. In addition, the old put-down voice is likely to redouble its efforts to disagree with the supportive voice. That may result in our putting ourselves down even more than we did before adding in an affirmation.

According to Wikipedia, “For an affirmation to be effective, it needs to be present tense, positive, personal and specific,” and another site offers the following examples:

“I am healthy, happy, wise and free”
“I am surrounded by people who love me.”

These examples include the four criteria mentioned in wikipedia, but they don’t quite match my reality.

Although “I am healthy, happy, wise and free” doesn’t have a universal “all” in it, it is implied, and I don’t know of anyone who is always healthy, happy, wise, or free. If I say this to myself when I am sick, sad, stupid, or feeling stuck, that will contradict what I experience, and it won’t be very useful.

How often is it true that you are surrounded by people who love you? You might have several people around you at home who love you very much, but at work or in the grocery store there are probably at least a few others who are indifferent, and some others may even be antagonistic.

If an affirmation doesn’t fit with your reality, the part of you that keeps track of reality will be aroused to question it, again defeating the purpose of the affirmation. However, if we create internal voices that are a bit more subtle in exactly what words they use, there are ways around this difficulty.
The interesting instruction that follows was posted about a year ago on an email newsgroup by Vikas Dikshit, an NLP-trained educator and trainer in Pune, India:

**A Happy World**

About 18 months ago a young woman asked me for help with her depression. She was visiting a psychiatrist and had been taking some medicine for depression for the preceding few months.

I suggested to her that she look around and mentally say to herself, “I am sitting on this happy chair. There is this happy table. And these are happy windows with happy curtains.” I made her do this for about ten minutes. I suggested she do this every day for about ten or fifteen minutes.

After fifteen days she called to say that she was feeling great now. After about two months she visited the psychiatrist and he stopped her medicine. She continues to call occasionally, and reports that she still feels great. The most recent one was when she was in my town about ten days ago.

About a year after this email, Vikas writes that his client still feels great, and that he has used the same method—or variations of it—successfully with a number of other clients. Although this method sounds far too simple to have any effect, it employs some very subtle aspects of language.

The simplest way to understand this process is that it is the same as what all of us often do, but used in a more directed way. If someone talks about a “crappy day,” they aren’t really talking about the day; they are talking about their feelings. When someone speaks of a “cheerful fire,” are they talking about the fire, or about how they feel? When someone talks about happy curtains, that implies that they are feeling happy.

There is usually a correspondence or equivalence between someone’s internal state and what they perceive around them. A happy person lives in a happy world, and a sad person lives in a sad world. A sad person tends to notice sad events around them, while a happy person tends to notice the happy things. Vikas’ method uses this equivalence in the reverse direction to bring about a change in mood. Noticing happy things implies feeling happy.

Since all the sentences are about some aspect of the world being happy, there is no conflict between saying that when the person is not feeling happy. An unhappy person can still talk about happy curtains. This is very different from the “I am happy” affirmation, which will contradict your present state if you are unhappy.
This process directs your attention to things around you in the present moment, just as any useful meditation does. Since you have limited attention, this will simultaneously withdraw your attention from whatever you have been attending to that was making you unhappy, including any negative self-talk that has been going on in your mind.

The word “happy” is a trigger for that state, so using it tends to elicit happy feelings, no matter what it describes, even a chair or a table. When I describe the curtains as “happy,” that connects the word happiness with the curtains—and with everything else around me that I describe with the word “happy.” After that, each time I look at the curtains—and the other things around me—I will think of the word “happy,” and that will tend to elicit that happy feeling. If everything around me is labeled in this way, I will soon be surrounded by things that are now associated with the word “happy,” which elicits that feeling state.

You need to be very cautious if you include other people in your happy observations, and notice what kind of response it elicits in you, because that may create a contrast that is not helpful. If I notice a happy child, that may make me feel happy, because I am not a child—just as I am not a chair or curtain. But if I notice other adults being happy, that contrast with my present state may deepen my unhappiness. If others around me are happy, when I am unhappy, that can make my unhappiness even worse. So it is much safer to not include other people at all—or even children or animals—and just use inanimate objects.

Another way of thinking about this method is that it is an example of the hypnotic language pattern called “selectional restriction.” Since a window can’t be happy, your mind will unconsciously attempt to make meaning out of the word “happy” by applying it to something else. If you are alone, you are the only other available possibility, and even if you are with others, you are still a possibility. All this processing will occur completely unconsciously, so it can’t be countered by your conscious thinking.

Of course despite all this wonderful understanding, this process can be completely nullified if someone uses a voice tone that is sarcastic, scornful, or dismissive, as we explored in chapter 2. But if you use a tone that is ordinary, simply reporting your experience “objectively,” or one that includes even a little bit of pleasure, it will work. Whether you do this with yourself, or with someone else, you can notice the tonality, and change it if it does not support the process.

You can also use this method with any other useful adjective, such as “calm” or “peaceful” for someone who is too easily agitated, “loving” for someone who feels angry, or “balanced” or “centered” for someone who feels scattered or chaotic. Simply identify the problem mood, think of its opposite, and then select an adjective that expresses this opposite mood to put in the place of “happy.”
For instance, if someone is often fearful or anxious, the opposite of that is safe, and they can use this word to describe the world around them. “I see the safe chair,” “Those are safe curtains,” “This is a safe computer,” etc.

Be sure that you choose an opposite experience, not something in the mid-range of a continuum. For instance, if you are often critical and rejecting, the opposite of that would be welcoming or loving, not accepting, which is too neutral.

Try this now. Think of an unpleasant state that you sometimes slip into. . . . Then think of its opposite, a positive state that you would like to have in its place. . . .

Then use this word to describe the things around you, either internally, or out loud. Continue to do this for several minutes, and notice how it changes your response. . . .

This method is an affirmation that will work, and it won’t arouse other conflicting voices to disagree with it. What can we learn from the two examples I have given?

“I am sitting on this happy chair,” etc.
“What else can I enjoy right now?”

First, they all direct attention to events in the present moment, withdrawing your attention from whatever is going on in your mind that may be contributing to your unpleasant state.

Second, it is a process that you can do right now—whatever your present state is—in contrast to an end point (enjoyment, happiness) which may seem distant in time and unattainable.

Third, they don’t contradict your reality in the moment.

Fourth, they direct attention to something in the world external to you, yet in a way that naturally and indirectly elicits an internal resourceful state of enjoyment or happiness.

These four characteristics of a positive affirmation that works can be put to use for other states. Let’s take the other three qualities in one of the previous examples of an affirmation given above: healthy, wise, and free. How could you use the models given above to elicit a feeling of being healthy? . . .

“I am sitting on a healthy chair,” etc.
“What else can I notice about my healthy functioning right now?”

Now do the same with wise and free, and then go on to create affirmations about pleasure, beauty, love, balance, or whatever you want more of in your life. “What else pleases me right now.” “What else is beautiful to me right now.” “What else can I love right now.” “What else is balanced in my experience right now?”
Appreciate & Smile Exercise

Another exercise that Vikas offers to participants in his trainings is provided below:

With their eyes closed, I ask them to imagine they are standing in front of the front door of their home. I ask them to feel the key in their hands, and hear it turning in the lock as they open the door. And then I ask them to appreciate the door, and smile. Then I ask them go around the home and appreciate and smile with everything that they see or hear.

And then repeat the same process of appreciating and smiling with all the family members, neighbors and acquaintances. Then they do the same for the other places that they visit often, like office, school or shops. And then repeat this with some strangers as well.

And I also ask them to go inside their own bodies and appreciate and smile with all their body parts.

The whole exercise takes about fifteen minutes when I teach it; it requires less than five minutes when they do it on their own. I suggest that they do this for about a month or so, and notice the results.

Once again, the idea is to connect that appreciative and smiling state to all the usual things and people in the person’s life. It does not paste a fake smile on their face; it increases the chances that the person will generally appreciate and smile and be happy everywhere.

Paul Ekman’s (15) very detailed research has shown that even if you ask someone to smile artificially—or simply hold a pencil between their teeth, which requires the same kind of muscle movements around the mouth—that elicits happiness because that muscle position is unconsciously associated with smiling, and smiling is associated with pleasure and happiness.

Vikas’ instruction is more subtle than asking someone to deliberately smile. It first asks you to see something externally, and then to say some words of appreciation internally, creating a natural context for a spontaneously smile.

In this chapter I have presented a number of ways that you can talk to yourself without contradicting what you might already be saying to yourself. They are elegant and graceful ways to change your experience.

Next we will explore how to replace an existing voice with a new voice that is more useful. We have to be cautious when doing this because there is always a potential for conflict.
In previous chapters, you have learned how to change nonverbal aspects of the direction, location, volume, tonality and tempo of a troublesome voice in order to reduce its impact on you. You have also learned how to add music or a song to a voice in order to change your response, and in the previous chapter you have experimented with several ways to talk to yourself that are useful and effective.

Now we can begin to use some of these methods in combination to make a useful change. For instance, once you have reduced the volume of a troublesome voice, you can then replace it with a more resourceful and supportive voice without creating significant conflict. The following example is from Ron Soderquist, an NLP-trained hypnotherapist in the Los Angeles area:

A middle-aged woman called to say she wanted her husband to come in for hypnosis to change his attitude. “I am sick and tired of his negative attitude.” I was amused, and asked her to have him call me. She was right. When Bill came in for an appointment he said, “I grew up in a very negative, unhappy family. There were no ‘Atta boys’ in our family; there was only criticism. They were unhappy with their marriage, and it was a rare day when Dad or Mom laughed or showed happiness.” He went on, “My wife complains that I come home from work grumbling and complaining. She says I’m just like my parents, and she’s probably right, but I can’t seem to help myself. I don’t see how you can help me change. I don’t like being so angry with the kids, and I don’t like having an unhappy wife. If you can help me change, great.”
After some questioning, Bill identified his parents’ negative voices in his head. I asked if he could imagine a room in his head with the voices coming from a radio or some device over by the wall. He was able to imagine a radio. Then I wondered whether he would like to go over and turn down the volume, or perhaps put a pillow in front of the radio to muffle the sound. As he did this, he gave a big sigh, and visibly relaxed.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“My head is quiet for the first time ever,” Bill said. I told him, “Since it’s your head, you can put in anything you want. For example, because you are thankful for your family and your health, you can fill that room with your own thankful voice, if you wish.” To his surprise Bill discovered he could do that quite easily. We rehearsed him in reviewing his thankful thoughts while driving home from work, so that he could greet his wife and children with joyful energy. After some rehearsal, he felt confident he had installed new voices in his head. Bill’s wife called later to report she was enjoying a new, positive Bill; he had changed his attitude.

Ron Soderquist, http://www.westlakehypnosis.com/

I think it is pretty amazing that you can change a pervasive, life-long negative attitude in a few minutes, just by changing an internal voice—without extensive therapeutic time-traveling back to the traumatic origin of his voices.

However, I want you to think about what would have happened if Bill hadn’t reduced the volume of his negative self-talk before adding in a resourceful and supportive voice. If there were two loud voices in his head, they would conflict with each other, setting up an internal battle. Most people have enough conflict in their lives already; they don’t need more of it.

Many people seek help because they already have chronic unpleasant internal conflicts like this. A common troubling conflict is between some version of “Be sure to do what others approve of,” and “No, be independent and think for yourself.” A conflict like this often puts you “between a rock and a hard place,” because whatever you decide to do, afterwards the other side will torment you. “You just went along with the crowd again, you wimp,” or “You sure ‘blew it’ with the guests by telling that racy joke.”

Another common conflict is between indulging in a present pleasure on one hand, and its future consequences on the other. One voice may say something like, “Go ahead and treat yourself by eating that dessert; you deserve it,” while another warns, “If you eat that, you’ll get fat, and no one will want to be around you.” Whether or not you eat the dessert, the other side will badger you with the consequences later. “You denied yourself a simple pleasure that would have made you
feel really good,” or “Now you’ve done it; you’ll have to watch what you eat all next week in order to lose the calories in that cheesecake.”

However, a number of well-respected therapies—and most books about negative self-talk—strongly advocate talking back to a critical internal voice as a way to lessen its influence. For instance, David Burns is a student of Aaron Beck, who is sometimes described as the “father” of Cognitive Therapy or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (11). CBT has even deeper roots in the work of Albert Ellis, whose work was originally called Rational Therapy, later Rational Emotive Therapy, and finally Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (16) as it evolved over the years. As early as the 1950s—half a century ago!—Ellis advocated actively verbally challenging a client’s self-defeating beliefs and behaviors by demonstrating the irrationality, self-defeatism and rigidity of their negative self-talk. Burns is one of many Cognitive Therapists who advocate countering a troublesome voice:

“Talk back to that internal critic! . . .

a. Train yourself to recognize and write down the self-critical thoughts as they go through your mind;
b. Learn why these thoughts are distorted; and
c. Practice talking back to them so as to develop a more realistic self-evaluation system.” (12, p. 62)

In this process the client is taught how to notice the content of automatic thoughts, identify the kind of distortion, and then generate a rational response. For instance, if the automatic thought is “I never do anything right,” the distortion is overgeneralization, and a rational response is, “Nonsense, I do a lot of things right.”

“This shows what a jerk I am” is an example of the distortion called labeling, and a rational response is, “Come on, now, I’m not ‘a jerk.’ ” These rational responses disagree with and oppose the troublesome voice. Other people don’t like to be disagreed with, and internal voices are no different; they are likely to become defensive and redouble their efforts to convince you of what they are saying.

Burns developed this method while working with seriously depressed patients who were often suicidal, having given up all hope of having a normal satisfying life. The main symptoms of depression are feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness. Most—if not all—of depression is in response to internal voices that criticize, berate, and torment. In this context, rallying the patient to oppose their internal voices can be a huge step forward, and research does indicate that CBT gets results with depression that are superior to antidepressant medication and most other therapies.
Since then, Burns has applied the same method to quite a variety of other problems that result from troublesome internal voices, including anger, guilt, addiction to love and approval, and perfectionism. If someone who is suffering from one of these problems feels completely defeated, then mobilizing a rational response to it can be a very useful first step.

Although a battle between two voices might be somewhat better than only being a slave to a troublesome voice, it is still an inelegant solution that leaves the person split between the two. It is much better to reduce the impact of the troublesome voice before adding in a resourceful voice.

However, reducing the volume of the troublesome voice is only useful if it has no positive function or intent in the present. There is at least a possibility that a troublesome voice might have some useful information for you. Often an internal voice wants to protect you from some kind of problem or danger, even if this is hidden inside insults and criticism. It could be warning of an actual physical danger, “If you did that, you could get seriously hurt.” Or it might caution you against being disappointed, embarrassed, or criticized by others—dangers to your status, or your idea of who you are. “Don’t make a fool of yourself at the party tonight.”

Often a voice once had a useful function in a past context, but it is now outdated and irrelevant. For instance, a voice may have once warned you not to anger Dad; now that Dad has been dead for years, it is no longer serves a useful function, so it can be safely reduced in volume. But at other times a voice wants you to notice a mistake, so that you can improve what you do. “Boy, you really screwed up that interview!” What a voice says may be unpleasant, and may even be counterproductive, but it usually has the positive intent of making your life better in some way.

If you just reduced the volume of this voice, you would also lose its useful positive intent—“throwing out the baby with the bathwater.” Many people desperately need some kind of warning voice, because they keep making the same mistakes over and over without noticing. Losing a protective voice can have much more unpleasant consequences than hearing an unpleasant internal voice and feeling bad.

Bill’s voice was apparently simply a result of his history with his critical and unhappy parents. Since it had no useful function in the present, its volume could be reduced without losing anything. When a voice still has a positive function, simply reducing the volume won’t work well, and the voice is likely to stay loud or return. Although reducing the volume of a troublesome voice reduces potential conflict, it doesn’t eliminate it altogether, so even this solution is not as elegant as it could be, and we will explore other better alternatives in following chapters.

Here is another nice example of adding a more resourceful voice to a troubling one, again from Ron Soderquist.
**Tommy Bangs his Head**

The mother, Julie, called me and related: “Our Tommy is five years old and we are worried about him.”

“What does he do that worries you?”

“Whenever he spills milk at the table or makes any mistake, he gets out of his chair and bangs his head against the wall while saying, ‘You are stupid. You are dumb.’” I invited them to come in as a family.

It appeared that the parents were a normal couple. There were no “red flags” in their relationship with Tommy. Nor was there anything of note in Tommy’s body language. Julie reported that her son enjoyed kindergarten and played well with friends. He had no other strange behaviors. However, Tommy would bang his head a few times a week on average. This behavior had been going on for at least several months.

I first considered recommending testing for autism. But in my experience, behaviors can often be addressed by simple, self-hypnotic suggestions. I looked directly into Tommy’s eyes, and began telling a story. . . .

“Once upon a time there was a little boy squirrel named Timmy who felt bad because he couldn’t do anything right.” Tommy nodded his head.

“When Timmy climbed trees with his friends he would slip and fall down.” Tommy nodded his head again. “When Timmy hid nuts he would forget where he hid them. He felt dumb.” Tommy nodded his head again. I embellished the story in great detail so Tommy would fully identify with Timmy the squirrel.

“Timmy the squirrel’s parents finally bring their little boy to visit the Wise Old Owl who lives in the big oak tree. Because owls have wonderful eyesight he saw them coming from afar, and said, ‘I see you are a squirrel family, how can I help you?’ Mommy and Daddy told the owl that Timmy banged his head against trees and called himself names when he made a mistake.

“The Wise Old Owl thought for a moment, and then he looked right at little Timmy and said, ‘Little Timmy the Squirrel, do you have a belly button? Let me see your belly button.’ At this command, Tommy pulled up his shirt and looked at his belly button.

“The Wise Old Owl continued, ‘Little Timmy, take a good look at your belly button, because everyone who has a belly button makes mistakes. From now on, whenever you make a mistake, just look at your belly button and say, ‘It’s OK. Everyone who has a belly button makes mistakes.’
“Then I told him, ‘Now you and your Mommy and Daddy go home and enjoy being part of a loving family.’” At that, I ended the session.

Julie called the following week to report Tommy had stopped banging his head.

Ron Soderquist, http://www.westlakehypnosis.com/

Like the previous example of the man with a critical attitude, Tommy’s voice apparently had no positive function in the present. Some of the things that we learn are pretty much random. Tommy may have heard something like his voice at school, or on the playground—kids can sometimes be even more cruel and unthinking than adults. Somehow it stuck with him as something very important. All he needed was some skillful instruction in how to think differently. In this case, the instruction was embedded in a story about a squirrel.

I’d like to point out the importance of telling Tommy to look at his belly button. If Ron had instead said something like, “Everyone makes mistakes;” it wouldn’t have had nearly as much impact, because it would be too abstract and general. It might not necessarily apply to Tommy, and he might not remember it at the appropriate times. Having him look at his belly button provides a specific visual cue that both triggers the thought, and also applies it to him specifically. Every time Tommy looks at his belly button—or imagines seeing his belly button—he will think of the instruction, “It’s OK. Everyone who has a belly button makes mistakes.”

Another way of thinking about what Ron did with Tommy is that he taught him a way to be more self-accepting. Making mistakes is something that everyone does. Recognizing that something is a normal thing to do is a process that is often called “normalization.” Let’s explore self-acceptance in more detail.

**Self-acceptance**

Whenever someone doesn’t like something about themselves, they are likely to criticize and reject themselves, which is the opposite of self-acceptance. Then if they learn about affirmations, they may try saying something like, “I deeply and completely accept myself.” That sets up a direct conflict between the self-rejection and the self-acceptance, as I have discussed earlier.

However, there is a way to talk to yourself in an accepting way that doesn’t conflict with any self-rejection that you already experience, and I’d like you to discover what that is like. First think of something that you don’t like about yourself—your weight, your getting angry, not speaking up for yourself, dark moods, or whatever it might be. . . .

Then listen to what you say to yourself when you do this. “You’re a fat lazy
pig,” “I get angry all the time,” “You’re a wimp,” “I’m no fun to be around,” or something like that. . . .

Now try saying to yourself, “I deeply and completely accept myself,” and notice what you experience in response to that. . . .

There are a variety of ways to respond to this, but what they have in common is some kind of weakening of the self-affirmation, because of the conflict between the two sentences.

Now try putting your two sentences together in the following sentence:

“Even though I (am a fat lazy pig, get angry, am a wimp, have dark moods, etc.) I deeply and completely accept myself.”

Say that sentence several times, and notice how you feel in response, and how that is different from what you experienced when the two sentences were separated. . . .

The words “even though” have a very interesting way of joining what seem to be opposite or contradictory experiences. After all, “not liking something about myself,” is certainly the opposite of “deeply and completely accepting myself.” “Even though” completely accepts your not liking something and joins it with deep and complete self-acceptance. It states the opposites in a way that they don’t conflict with each other.

This exact sentence “Even though I (critical self-evaluation) I deeply and completely accept myself” is widely used in a method called “Emotional Freedom Technique” (EFT) (14) and also appears less prominently in other approaches. However, “even though” can be used in many other ways to join apparent opposites.

“Even though I have failed repeatedly, I can learn to succeed.”

“Even though I don’t like healthy food, I can lose weight.”

“Even though I’m lazy, I can satisfy my boss.”

The general pattern is the following:

“Even though I (statement of problem or difficulty) I (statement of a positive outcome).

Try this yourself. First think of a personal lack, or something about you that you criticize, and then think of a future goal or outcome—to be happier, calmer, smarter, more perceptive, etc. and link them together using the sentence above, and notice how you experience that. . . .

There is another value in doing this that may not be immediately apparent. When people criticize themselves, they often use sentences to link their problem or lack to a future failure or inability:

“I have failed repeatedly, so I can’t succeed.”

“I don’t like healthy food, so I can’t lose weight.”
“I’m lazy, so I can’t satisfy my boss.”

Think of some sentence like this that you say to yourself, and then restate it in the form “Even though I (statement of problem or difficulty) I (statement of a positive outcome),” and experience what that is like. . . .

That kind of sentence links a problem to an outcome in a very interesting way that is the opposite of what most people usually do. It is almost as if you are saying that the problem will make it easier to reach your outcome.

“Because I have failed repeatedly, I’ll be able to succeed.”
“Since I don’t like healthy food, I’ll be able to lose weight.”
“Being lazy will make it easier to satisfy my boss.”

Even though those sentences may seem totally crazy to you, try saying them to yourself as if they were true, and then figure out how they actually could be true. . . .

Here are some possible realizations—out of many others:

“Failing repeatedly means that I know a lot about how to fail; if I just do the opposite, that should be a path to success.”

“Some healthy food is fattening, so avoiding that will make it easier for me to lose weight.”

“Since I’m lazy, I’m motivated to find ways to get a job done faster with less effort, and that will make my boss happy.”

“When I think that a sentence is totally crazy, thinking how it could be true can sometimes result in a useful new understanding.”

“Even though this may be new to you, you’ll find yourself noticing when you and other people use those two words, and become more aware of the change in attitude and outlook that results from doing that.”

Since adding in a more useful voice can be so dramatically helpful, what would happen if we added in several of them, speaking simultaneously, like a chorus? In the next chapter you will learn how to do that.
The word “perspective” may seem out of place in a book about internal voices, because that word is usually understood visually, as a way of seeing events, or a particular point of view. The word perspective is often used in an abstract or metaphorical way, in contrast to a specific description or instruction about what to do. If you have ever had someone tell you, “I wish you could get a better perspective on this problem,” you probably had no idea how to accomplish that. They provided a general outcome, but no specific way to actually achieve it.

There are many kinds of perspective, and it can help to first illustrate them in the visual system, where they are more familiar and easier to describe, before moving to the auditory system. There are many, many ways to gain perspective.¹

Fundamentally, the word perspective is used in situations in which we experience something in relation to something else, the “appearance of things relative to one another.” This is something that we do unconsciously thousands of times a day, because it is important to know how things around us are related to each other. If I want to pick up something that is lying on a table, I need to know its location in relation to me in order to do that.

In a painting, when we see similar objects (such as trees) painted in different sizes, we don’t see them in isolation, we see them in relation to each other. Because of our experience of things in the real world, we perceive the smaller ones as being farther away, creating a sense of distance and depth. If a painting showed a mouse

*This chapter is adapted from the appendix to Transforming Your Self: becoming who you want to be. (7)
and a person the same size, since we know that a mouse is actually much smaller than a person, we would either see the mouse much closer to us to account for this, or assume that the mouse was much larger, a giant mouse.

One way to describe most problems or unhappiness is that we develop “tunnel vision,” narrowly focusing in on a problem while ignoring everything else that surrounds it. Expanding our field of vision to include much more of what is happening simultaneously in the moment provides a larger context that is literally wider and broader in scope, in which we see the problem in relation to what is around it, the “big picture” that includes much more information.

For instance, if you have a plumbing problem, and you focus on that alone, it can seem overwhelming. You may even go on to other responses, like “Oh, it’s not fair; these things happen at the most inconvenient times,” a line of thinking that takes you into an unpleasant and unfair world of experience—and away from your problem entirely. But if you expand your focus to include all the other aspects of your home that are functioning well to keep you warm and safe, or think about what it would be like to have no plumbing at all, you can put the plumbing problem “in perspective” by relating it to other things or events.

Within a larger context, the problem typically appears much smaller and easier to solve. The additional information included in the big picture may even provide a basis for a solution that wasn’t available when focusing exclusively on the problem. If you have ever had a bad leak in a pipe and tried to stop it, expanding your scope to include the main shutoff valve helps tremendously.

Years ago I had a friend who often focused very narrowly. Once we were working together on a truck, putting on a radiator hose. He was busily tightening the metal clamp with a screwdriver, and he was puzzled because the hose was still loose, even after he had been tightening it for some time. Finally the hose started folding and crumpling, and he realized that it had slipped off the metal tube at the back of the radiator. He was so focused on the hose and the clamp that he didn’t notice something only a few inches away. On another occasion, he was using a pocketknife to cut a string that bound together a bunch of fruit trees that we were going to plant. He was oblivious to the fact that he was holding the bundle of trees with his left hand; as soon as the knife cut through the string, it would go right into his left hand!

When a doctor has to tell someone bad news about a serious illness, they typically only talk about the problem, and what needs to be done. The person receiving the bad news will usually think of the illness in isolation, and may become very upset. The resulting stress doesn’t help them make difficult decisions about treatment alternatives, and also doesn’t help them heal.

Now imagine that your doctor did the following, instead: “If we were to take
CAT scans or MRIs of your entire body, and put them up on view (gesturing as if putting a series of a dozen or more images up on the translucent viewing screen) we would find that almost all of them would show that your body is functioning in a healthy way, responding quickly and appropriately to any temporary injury or imbalance. Now (gesturing putting up one more image) there is a significant problem in this one area that we need to do something about.”

Seeing the illness or injury in relation to all those other images of healthy functioning would create a much broader perspective in which the illness would seem much less significant and less upsetting, and the prospects for treatment recovery would seem much better.

Another kind of perspective is to see an event that occurred in one place and time in relation to another in a different place and time. If someone you care for scowls at you, it would be easy to assume that they are angry with you and become upset. However, if you remember that they lost their job a couple of days ago, you can see their unhappiness in relation to that past event, and perhaps feel some compassion for what they are going through, a very different response that will probably be more useful than getting upset.

Whenever we plan, we think of what we can do now, in relation to how it will influence what will happen later, in a sequence of experiences. “If I leave before 3, I’ll avoid rush hour traffic.” “If I prepare thoroughly, then I’ll be pleased with the result.” “If I turn down eating that sweet dessert now, I’ll be able to enjoy a slender body that feels good all the time.”

Yet another kind of perspective results from seeing an unpleasant event, while simultaneously seeing several pleasant ones. For instance, you can literally see someone’s annoying behavior side by side with several images of times when you enjoyed their companionship in different ways. Seeing all those images together at the same time provides a “balanced perspective” that would be lost if you only saw their annoying behavior in isolation.

We also tend to take a problem experience out of the flow of time. If you see a still picture of a problem event, that isolates it from all the events that preceded it and followed it. And since a still picture doesn’t change, it seems to last for all eternity, magnifying the unpleasantness. This is something that happens commonly in people who have PTSD or other traumas. While this kind of concentration can sometimes be useful in order to study a problem to see what can be done, a narrow view often leaves out the very information that we need in order to start moving toward a solution.

When you see your partner doing that habit that particularly annoys you, if that is a still picture that fills your field of vision, you have “lost perspective” in this way. If you allow that still picture to expand into a movie that includes what happened
before and what will happen later, you will likely find many, many pleasant events in the past and in the future. When you see that annoying habit embedded in the flow of all the events in this larger time span, it typically seems much less important, less upsetting, and much easier to either accept, or to start working toward a solution.

To summarize, we can gain perspective by seeing an event in relation to its larger context in the moment, in relation to a future event, or a past event, or in the larger flow of events that occurred before and after that event. We can gain exactly the same kind of perspective in the auditory system.

For instance, if someone makes a critical comment, and that occupies all your attention, it can be pretty devastating. But if you also recall all the complimentary things that the same person said to you both before and after the critical comment, that expansion of your time frame can put that one comment in perspective. That makes it much easier to hear the critical comment, and then consider if that is something that you can use for feedback. It might be very accurate information about your behavior—even if it is communicated poorly—or it might be only information about the speaker’s frustration, and really has very little to do with you. Years ago, my wife and I developed a “strategy for responding to criticism” that is useful in regaining this kind of perspective. (3, ch. 8)

We often focus our “tunnel hearing” on one voice while ignoring their tone of voice, other voices, or all the other background sounds. You can broaden your scope of hearing to include all these sounds around you to provide a larger auditory context: “the big sound” that can create the same kind of perspective as “the big picture.”

You can relate what someone says in one place and time to something at another place and time, either from the past to the present, or from the present into the future. Recalling what someone said long ago may be useful to you in the present, or may be helpful in forecasting what someone may say in the future. You may decide to refuse something that a small child wants, “No, you can’t have that,” and hope to hear later, “Thanks Mom, I’m so glad that you were firm with me; that saved me a lot of trouble.”

Hearing one voice surrounded by a number of others will be familiar to anyone who has sung in a chorus. Although usually those in a chorus sing the same words, sometimes with different melodies, some choral works interweave different words as well as different melodies. This creates the same kind of perspective in the auditory system as seeing one image surrounded by others in the visual system. However, since this is something that many people have not learned to do, it can provide a particularly powerful new way of gaining perspective about a voice or sound.
Auditory Perspective Demonstration Transcript

I’d like to demonstrate one way to gain perspective with a troubling voice in the auditory system, using a process I learned years ago from John McWhirter. (18) I don’t need to know any content. It can be your own voice, or someone else’s voice, or it could even be a sound that has no words with it. (Tim volunteers.)

Tim, first I want you to listen to that voice, and verify that it still makes you uncomfortable. . . .

Tim: (looking up, and then down left and frowning) Yes, it sure does.

It looks like you get a picture first, before you hear the voice. Is that right? (Yes.) That’s fine, we can still use the voice. Is this your voice or someone else’s?

Tim: It’s my voice.

OK, so you’re talking to yourself. Where do you hear the voice?

Tim: Behind my head, to the right a little.

OK. Now just let that voice go to wherever voices go when you’re not listening to them, and think of four times in your life when your own voice served as a strong resource to you, perhaps commenting on a job well done, or some other satisfaction. Think of them one by one, and listen to what each one has to say, and the tonality, until you have four of them. . . . (Tim nods.)

Now position those four voices around your head, more or less evenly spaced, wherever seems appropriate to you—perhaps one in front, one in back, and one on either side, leaving an empty space at the back and right, where you heard that troubling voice. When you hear those four voices all talking at once, it will be harder to hear the details of what they are saying, but you can still hear the tonalities, and know the general nature of what they are saying. Let me know when that is set up, with all four voices talking at the same time, kind of like a chorus, with different parts. . . .

(Tim nods.) OK. Now bring that troubling voice back in to join the other four, and listen to all five voices at once. Notice if this arrangement changes your response to that voice in any way. . . .

Tim: It’s farther away now, and not as loud. I feel better; it’s easier to listen to it. I can hear some of what it’s saying as useful information, while before I was just noticing my bad feelings.

OK. Great. Does anyone have any questions for Tim?

Tess: Were you able to understand what the five voices were saying when they were all talking at once?

Tim: No. I knew they were there, and I could pick out bits and pieces, and the meaning was there, but I couldn’t really hear all five voices at once.

That’s typical of most of us, and it’s important to warn people about this, or they may worry they are doing the process wrong. A woman who was born blind
and only got her sight when she was about 30 could keep track of eight different speakers simultaneously, as if she had an eight-track tape recorder. But very few people can do that, and it’s not necessary for this process to work.

Tim: When I had the four resource voices talking at once, I felt like I was sitting in a big, comfortable overstuffed easy chair, as if the voices were literally supporting me physically.

That’s a nice spontaneous synesthesia; you experienced the voices as a kinaesthetic feeling of support.

When all five voices are being heard simultaneously, the four resource voices provide an auditory background perspective for really hearing the problem voice, instead of just being overwhelmed by the bad feelings that it generates when it is heard alone. Some people think of this as “the four resource voices overpowering the problem voice,” or some other description that presupposes conflict or competition, but that is a less useful way of understanding this process. The resource voices are not in disagreement about one event, saying “but.” They are simply all speaking at the same time about different events, saying “and,” which provides a more balanced perspective.

If the original troubling voice was someone else’s voice, the four resource voices should also be other peoples’ voices. The reason for making sure that the resource voices and the troubling voice are all either your own or someone else’s is to avoid posing any possible conflict between your own views and someone else’s. For instance, if the troubling voice were your own, and the resource voices were someone else’s, it would be easy to think, “They may disagree with me, but I know better,” or some other kind of conflict. As much as possible, we want to make changes that avoid creating any additional conflict.

Auditory Perspective Exercise Outline

Now you can do the same exercise that Tim did. Ideally you would do this with another person, so that one of you can read the directions, so the other can relax and devote all their attention to following the directions.

After one person has done the process, you can switch roles so that you can both experience the process. Many people find that it makes it much easier to attend to their inner experience if they close their eyes.

1. **Choose a Voice** Think of a troubling voice, and notice your feeling response to what it says. . . .

   Notice the location of the voice, and whether it’s your own voice or someone else’s. . . . Then set that voice aside temporarily.

   2. **Remember Voices** Recall four resource voices, times when you (or someone else) commented favorably about something that you had just done. Listen to
each voice in turn, noticing both the words and the tonality, and how you feel in response to hearing it. If the problem voice is another person’s, the resource voices should also be someone else’s; if the problem voice is your own voice, the resource voices should also be yours.

3. Arrange Voices Position these voices around your head—leaving a space for the location of the troubling voice—so that you can hear all four voices talking at once. It will be harder to hear the details when they are all talking, but you will still be able to hear the tonalities, and have a sense of the meanings.

4. Bring in the Troubling Voice Allow the troubling voice to return to its location, and listen to all five voices talking at once.

5. Notice Your Response Notice how your response changes in either intensity or quality, or both.

6. Test A few minutes later—or longer—you can check to find out how well the change has lasted. Simply recall the troubling voice, and notice your response again. Find out if your response is still different than it was before going through the auditory perspective process. Typically the change will last without doing anything else. Whenever you hear the troubling voice, you will again have the more comfortable feelings that you had when you first heard all five voices together.

When the change resulting from this method doesn’t last, usually that indicates that some other outcome is served by continuing to be distressed by the troubling voice. For instance, being upset by the voice could be useful in getting a spouse to assist you in some way, or to avoid some unpleasant task or duty. In that case, you need to find some other way to get assistance, or some other effective behaviors to use to avoid the task. Sometimes that is as simple as learning to say, “Honey, I want some help here,” or “No, I don’t want to do that,” instead of using your bad feelings to influence others around you.

There is nothing special about using four supportive voices; it is a nice number that works well. But you could also use three, or you could use more, and these additional choices might work better for certain people. Using three would make it easier to hear the details of the voices; hearing five or more could strengthen the chorus, even though the details of what they say would be harder to hear.

Next we will explore some additional useful ways of talking to yourself at the beginning of the day, so that you can start your day in a good state. If you start the day well, it is much easier to maintain it in the face of later unpleasant events. That is much easier than starting off badly and then having to work to improve it.
Some people bounce out of bed in the morning, eager to start the day, while others keep hitting the snooze button on their alarm, and then struggle to slowly drag themselves out of bed. The way you start the day is likely to set the pace for the rest of your day. If you start out eager and animated, it will be much easier to maintain that state, despite any difficulties that may occur later. But if you start the day discouraged, or in some other unpleasant mood, then you will have to work yourself out of that state in order to feel better, which is usually much more difficult.

What often makes the difference is what you first say to yourself as you emerge from sleep. You may awaken in response to an alarm clock, or in response to light, or to the sounds of others in the house getting up. As you begin to waken and sense the world around you, what are the first words in your mind? What is the first thing that you said to yourself this morning? 

- How about yesterday morning? 
- Now check several other recent mornings. What did you say then, and how did it set a tone for the rest of the day? 

- Now notice all the tonal qualities of that internal voice—the tone, volume, tempo, hesitations, etc. !

- If you said something like, “Ohmigod, I have to go to work today,” in a discouraging tone, you probably had to work hard to get out of bed and get going, and that attitude is likely to persist during the rest of the day.

—This chapter is adapted from _Six Blind Elephants_ (5, vol. 2, ch. 1, pp. 13-16).
On the other hand, if you said something like, “Wow, which of my projects do I get to do first?” in an enthusiastic tone, then getting out of bed was probably very easy, and it would take a really unpleasant event to change your positive attitude.

If you would like to change how you talk to yourself in the morning, there are six simple steps:

1. **Desired outcome**  First, think about how you would like to feel as you start out your day, . . .

2. **Desired self-talk**  What could you say to yourself, and what tone and tempo of voice you could use to create that? . . .

3. **Identify cues**  Next notice what you will see, hear, or feel as you first begin to wake up, and then say your sentence to yourself. . . .

4. **Check for objections**  Notice any objections or feelings of concern that you might have about doing this. . . .

5. **Satisfy objections**  If you have any objections, identify any problems with either the words that you chose, or the tonality and tempo that you chose. Then adjust what you say to yourself, or how you say it (or both) until any objections or concerns are satisfied. When all aspects of you are satisfied with it, it will be something that you are congruent about wanting, and it should occur spontaneously and dependably. . . .

6. **Rehearse and test**  Imagine waking up in the future in order to test what you have done. Experience what it will be like tomorrow morning, when you first begin to realize that you are waking up, and notice what happens. . . .

If your morning sentence occurs automatically, you are done. If it doesn’t, you may need to rehearse it several more times just as you begin to wake up to make it automatic, or you might have to back up a few steps and adjust what you say to yourself, or the tonality that you use.

Next, I want to offer you a somewhat more complex way to begin the day, one that can be used to change a wide variety of problems, as well as more positive outcomes.

**Behaving “As if”**

Giorgio Nardone and Claudette Portelli, in their book, *Knowing Through Changing* (19) use the following instruction as part of their work with clients. It’s a very interesting method that can be used to change *any* problem whatsoever, by installing an internal voice that initiates a daily pattern of thinking and behavior.

During the following weeks, I’d like you to ask yourself this question. Every day, in the morning, question yourself: “What would I do differently today if I no longer had my problem, or if I had recovered from
my problem?” Among all the things that come to your mind, choose the smallest, most minimal but concrete thing, and put it into practice. Every day, choose a small but concrete thing as if you had already overcome your problem, and voluntarily put it into practice. Every day choose something different. (19, p. 73)

Those who would like to develop their ability to model useful communication patterns may wish to pause before reading further, and reread the instruction above, perhaps several times. Then think of a problem that you have, and vividly imagine actually carrying out this instruction every morning over a period of a week or two. . . .

Then review your experience, and notice how this instruction redirects your attention, and how you respond to that. . . .

Then use whatever understanding of NLP you have to recognize familiar elements, and think about how the different aspects of this instruction work to initiate and amplify change. . . .

This instruction is an example of “tasking” or “homework,” in which someone is given specific instructions about what to do outside the therapy session, to support a desired change. Many of Milton Erickson’s (10) interventions directed clients to do certain things that would change how they experienced their problems. Often these instructions were puzzling and mysterious, and often were delivered within a hypnotic trance in order to amplify their impact, and make sure that they were carried out.

Erickson often talked about making a small change that would begin a “snowball” effect, growing into a much larger and more lasting change. However, this certainly isn’t true of all our attempts to change. People often make a small change and it doesn’t “snowball” at all. Someone makes some effort, resolution, or decision, and then quickly backslides into their old behavior. What is the difference between a small change that will “snowball” in a useful way, from one that won’t? There are many different elements in this instruction that support each other, and that result in a cascade of change.

First, the instruction is oriented toward the client voluntarily doing something different—both the actual small behaviors selected, and also the mental activities required in order to follow the directions—in contrast to passively hoping for some change to come from outside them.

The instruction repeatedly uses an “as if” categorization—that they have recovered from their problem—to create a “make believe” world in which anything can happen, free of the constraints and limitations of the real world. This neutralizes any objections based on judgments that someone might have about the instructions.
being “impossible,” “unrealistic,” “silly,” “stupid,” etc. Within this “as if” categorization, the concrete behaviors that the person selects (not suggested or imposed from others) become linked with having recovered from the problem.

Since they are told to choose the smallest thing, they will have to think of all the things on their list in order to choose the smallest one. If they had been told to “just pick one thing that would be different,” they would not have had to think of all of them. The instruction to choose the smallest thing seems to minimize the task, but it actually makes it more impactful, because it draws their attention to all the things that would be different.

Then when they actually do one of the concrete behaviors, that makes it real, taking it out of the “as if” categorization. Since this real behavior is linked with recovery, that implies that it is equally real that the problem has already been overcome. Usually this will occur entirely outside of their conscious awareness; they will only notice that their lives are going better, or that their depression has lightened somewhat, etc.

When they are asked to choose from “among all the things that come to your mind,” that they would do if they had recovered, that presupposes that many things will come to their mind. That directs their attention to the category, “all the things that you would do if you had recovered,” and that strengthens each individual thing by associating it with all the others.

Because of the linkage between the specific behaviors and recovery, each example that they think of will direct their attention to what it will be like to have recovered from the problem. That focuses their attention repeatedly on the solution, rather than the problem—and this will be true even if they don’t actually do any of the things that they think of.

Another way of describing this is that the client is told to repeatedly think about recovering from the problem every morning, and then to do a specific behavior that validates the implied recovery. Since every morning begins with the implication of having recovered from the problem, that makes it likely that they will also think of it, consciously or unconsciously, at other times throughout the day. This instruction would not be nearly as effective if it were assigned in the evening—unless perhaps there was an explicit suggestion to continue to do it in their dreams while sleeping.

The client is told to choose the “smallest, most minimal” thing to do, in order to make the task appear easy to do, avoiding any residual objection or resistance. However, it really doesn’t matter how small the task is, it will still create the connection between the “small thing” done, and recovery. If a smile is an indication of happiness, it doesn’t matter how small or brief it is.

Since the client does this over a period of weeks, and each morning they have to choose a different smallest thing that they would do if they had recovered, each
day they will have to choose a somewhat larger thing to do from those remaining ones that they have thought of.

If the client enlarges the list by including additional “smaller” things that would indicate recovery, that means that they will think of the solution even more often as they review this larger category of things in order to choose the “smallest” one. And if they are at all oppositional or rebellious, they may decide to do one of the “larger” things, giving them an opportunity to resist a small element, while still complying with the overall task. If they do a “larger” thing, that will be even better evidence for the implication that they have recovered.

Furthermore, since each morning the client does something different in the category “what I would do if I had recovered,” soon there will be a group of things that they have already done that indicate that they have recovered. That group of experiences will become larger and more compelling each day, providing more and stronger evidence for having recovered as time goes by.

Thinking of the actions that indicate recovery and doing one of them each day will also sensitize them to when they do these actions spontaneously during the day. For instance, if smiling or laughing are two of the behaviors, and they find themselves smiling or laughing sometime during the day, they will tend to notice that they have spontaneously smiled or laughed, instead of ignoring it. A spontaneous response is even better evidence that they are recovering than a deliberate action.

And if they refuse to do the task, they will probably still think of it every morning, perhaps even more than if they did it. Even thinking of the task will sensitize them to all the behaviors that would indicate that they have recovered from their problem. This inner rehearsal will make it more likely that they will do one (or more) of the behaviors, and will also make it more likely that they will notice them when they occur spontaneously.

This instruction is a beautiful example of how to pack a host of implications and presuppositions into a task, most of which will be completely outside the client’s awareness. This instruction will work just as well when you understand its structure, and you can also give the instructions to yourself, rather than being told by someone else.

The instructions can be made more generative by rewording them so that it is not about a problem, but about a positive outcome that would expand your resourcefulness, creativity, enjoyment, etc. Pick some positive outcome or change that you would like to make, and then ask yourself “What would I do differently today if I had my outcome?”

For instance, let’s say your outcome is to have a better relationship with your partner. Each morning, think about all the things that you would do if that were already true? Would you speak in a softer tone of voice? Would you listen longer,
even when what they are saying isn’t that interesting to you, or you have heard it many times before? Would you touch them gently when you ask for something? Would you think more often about their desires, or what they would find enjoyable? Pause now to pick a positive outcome, and a number of things that you would do if it were already achieved. . .

Each day, choose the smallest of the things that you think of, and actually do it. Each day choose a different thing to do. You will soon find out what a useful and effective task it is.

Nardone and Portelli developed their intervention out of a theoretical and practical orientation that can generally be described as a “strategic approach,” which is significantly different from NLP. Although they don’t have NLP background, their instructions include a number of fundamental NLP principles, while missing some others.

The first and most obvious missing piece is the lack of an explicit process to develop a well-formed outcome, in order to make sure that the outcome will actually accomplish what you want. I will describe a detailed process for doing this in chapter 9, pp. 82-91.

The other major omission is the lack of any explicit congruence check to be sure that reaching the outcome will preserve the person’s other desired outcomes, what is usually termed “ecology.” Even a simple question like, “Does any part of you have any objection to doing any of these things?” would begin to explore how a proposed solution could have drawbacks or problems that would block or impede reaching it.

Nardone and Portelli have successfully used this pattern with a variety of eating disorders, obsessions and compulsions, and depression—all significant problems that are often quite difficult to treat. In all of those problems, the behaviors are pretty commonplace, so I think it is unlikely that someone would set an outcome that would cause serious problems.

However, if this intervention were to be applied to an outcome like flying an airplane, or gaining some other skill that could put the person or someone else in danger, ecology could become a serious issue; hopefully this would be taken care of in a careful outcome specification process that preceded giving the instruction.

This intervention is a very general one, with wide applicability (“any problem”), so of course there is a corresponding lack of precision. Some fundamental interventions like rapport, or a solution focus, are a useful part of resolving a wide variety of problems. More specific and detailed interventions will usually be much more effective with some problems or outcomes, and much less effective with others that have a different structure.

My favorite example of this is that a phobia has the exact opposite structure
from grief. In a phobia someone fully *steps into* and re-experiences a very *unpleasant* memory, while in grief, someone *steps out of* a very *pleasant* memory. If someone were to try to use the phobia cure on grief (or the grief process on a phobia) it would make the problem worse, not better. That is why my preference is to use very specific and detailed interventions that are precisely designed to do exactly what the client wants—or needs, which is not always the same! As NLP develops more and more detailed specific patterns for specific problems or outcomes, this becomes even more true.

However, any process that works is worth learning, and the instruction above is a wonderful example. One of its great advantages is that the instruction is complete in itself, and does not require any special skills on the part of the person using it. The process can even be given in written form, as I have done here, so that someone can try it on their own.

In this chapter we have reviewed some additional ways to add a voice to your experience in order to make a useful change. Next I want to explore a number of very important aspects of the words that we use to describe our experience.
Troublesome voices have many different aspects. Usually they describe events or ourselves in ways that make us feel bad. However they can do this in a variety of ways, with varying impact. Among them are generalizations, evaluations, and presuppositions.

**Generalization**

Words are one of the primary ways that we generalize about our experience, a very useful skill. When someone uses the word “chair” we know immediately that is something that we can sit on.

However, this skill also has some very serious drawbacks. For instance, notice what specific image comes to your mind when you read the word “chair” in the previous sentence. What kind of chair is it? What does it look like? What shape is it, what color is it, what is it made of, etc. . . .

Do you suppose that your chair looks the same as the one that I had in mind when I wrote the previous paragraph? Mine was a hotel meeting room chair, with shiny chromium metal legs and frame, and some gray-blue coarse cloth upholstery.

Yours was probably different from mine in a number of ways. Often we think of a somewhat “generic” chair, perhaps a wooden dinner chair, or some other common type of chair that you might find in a home. Or you might have thought of a
particular chair that is special to you in some way, perhaps a favorite chair. You probably didn’t think of a lawn chair, a throne, or an antique chair.

When we use a single word like “chair” to describe a wide range of things that we can sit on, that is a very useful way to organize our experience, and communicate at least a semblance of our experience to someone else. We know that something described with that word “chair” can be used in a certain way, roughly what size it is, and something about what it is made of, how long it is likely to last, etc. For contrast, compare your image of the word “chair” with your image of the word “cloud,” or “mountain,” and you can begin to notice how much information a single image can contain.

When we identify several different objects as a “chair” we tend to think of what a chair can be used for, and ignore all the differences between individual chairs. And we also do something else; we tend to forget that a chair can be used for many other purposes than sitting—to block a door, to impress the neighbors, to fend off a snarling dog, feed a fire in an emergency, etc. In many areas of our lives this only occasionally causes some misunderstanding. You may offer to give me a chair, and I accept, thinking of an ordinary chair. But when you arrive with your museum piece chair, I realize that it wouldn’t fit in with any of the other furniture that I have.

The image that comes to your mind when you understand a word is called a prototype by cognitive linguists. (17) When we read or hear or see a word like “chair,” we use our prototype to represent all the objects that could be described as a “chair,” and then respond to this prototype image. This usually is not a significant problem when we are thinking of a chair, or some other physical object, though it can be. For instance, if someone offers me a “drink,” I may accept, thinking of water, while my host may have alcohol, strong coffee, or something else very different “in mind.”

This kind of misunderstanding is often much more problematic when we describe events that are judgments about each other or ourselves. For instance, when we describe what someone just said about us as a “criticism” that word—just like the word “chair”—can describe and evoke a multitude of experiences that we have had throughout a long period of time, and in a wide range of situations. What image will we use as a prototype to represent the meaning of that word?

Often we will use an emotionally charged memory of what someone said when they criticized us in the past. If we do, then we will respond to that image, rather than to the present event. Another way of responding to someone’s else’s “criticism” is to internally hear a loud chorus of many “criticisms” that we have experienced over a period of years. The present event might be a very small criticism about how we did the dishes. But our emotional response may seem “all out of proportion” to others unless they realize that we are responding to internal images from our past.
This process often occurs below the level of our conscious awareness, so we don’t even realize that we are responding to these past events, not the present. We only notice the horrible feelings that we have as a result.

As soon as we have labeled what someone said as a “criticism,” we are likely to forget that the same set of words could be labeled as a “comment,” “feedback,” “honesty,” “good information,” “caring concern,” or some other description that would evoke a very different prototype image, and a very different feeling response. This is one of the many ways that words can trap us in unpleasantness. Using a different word to describe the same set of experiences creates a new meaning that can release us from that trap.

Quite often we have the experience of receiving appreciation or caring from many people in a row, followed by one person who says something critical or rejecting. What do we typically do? Most of us ignore the many appreciations and caring that we received, and feel bad about the one rejection! We may even dismiss all the positive comments with a wave of the hand that shoves those images aside, often actually saying something like, “That’s irrelevant” or “Those don’t count.” This is using our ability to generalize in a way that is not useful, and all of us find ourselves doing this at times.

It is common for someone to say, “I had a bad day,” which can be very discouraging—especially if we have several in a row. But what does “having a bad day” really mean? Occasionally we may have a day in which it seems as if everything goes badly all through the day, from dawn to dusk. But usually it actually means something very different—that we had one, two, or possibly even several, things go badly, and we generalized from those to the entire day, when actually the rest of the day went rather well. Saying that we had a “bad day” ignores all the things that went well, distorting and contaminating our experience, and making us feel much worse than we really need to. John McWhirter has developed a very simple process for reevaluating this kind of destructive overgeneralization.

**Decontamination Pattern**

John McWhirter

Use this pattern for overgeneralized experiences that contaminate all the details with the summary feeling. For instance “a bad night out” contaminates all the good things that someone might have experienced during that period of time. The overgeneralization also tends to ignore the specific bad events, so they are not attended to in detail, and are difficult to learn from.

1. “Think of the ‘bad event,’ for example a bad night out, bad interview, bad day, etc.” . . .
2. “Now think of what was particularly bad in this event. This may temporarily result in your feeling worse.”

3. “Now notice that there are lots of things that are neutral, not directly involved with the particular bad event.” (Pause in order to let the person search for their own examples first.)

Then you can suggest additional examples, which will extend their range of examples and move their attention further away from the specific bad event. “For example the feeling in the back of your knee, the colors of what you see, other sounds that you hear, etc.”

4. “Now continue to notice what else is involved in that whole situation, and notice that there are aspects that would have been enjoyable had you not been distracted by the unpleasant event. For example, the sound of birds outside, other people around, enjoyable memories that you could think about, positive possibilities that you could be exploring, all the many things you could have been enjoying had you not been distracted by the unpleasant event.”

The suggestions given are first directed to what actually happened within the event and then extended to memories and imagination that you could have attended to in that situation; there are always positive thoughts you could be thinking.

5. “Now thinking about the whole situation, how would you summarize it now?”

Usually the situation is now experienced in a much more balanced way. The same process can also be very useful for overly positive generalizations, because specific negative events are ignored and not available to learn from.

When we describe ourselves, our ability to generalize can cause even more trouble. For instance, take a moment to think of what the word “loser” means to you.

What prototype image did you use to understand that word?

My image of “loser” is not just someone who has lost a race, or a job, or a girlfriend. It is of a stubble-faced disoriented homeless person in rags, who has lost almost everything. If I describe myself as a “loser,” the prototype image that I think of is likely to be a huge distortion of who I am. And my emotional response to my image of myself as a “loser” is likely to be way out of proportion to what actually happened, the loss of a job or a relationship.

When I use a word like “loser” to generalize about myself in response to a specific event—losing a job—that word tends to spread through all of space and
time—that I am a “loser” in all situations, throughout all the past and on into the future. That is what is often called “overgeneralization,” but in fact all our generalizations—no matter how useful—are overgeneralizations.

Using the word “loser” also makes it very difficult to think of all the times in my life when I have succeeded at something. Those other images of successes could bring some “perspective” to thinking about my loss, and elicit a more resourceful emotional response, but thinking of myself as a “loser” prevents that.

When we use universal “all or none” words like “all” or “always”—or “none” or “never”—our generalizations become even more explicitly universal. “I always lose.” “I never say the right thing.” “None of the things I do will ever succeed.” When someone generalizes into the future in this way, I usually ask them to show me their fortune-telling license. Usually they look a bit puzzled, until I point out that they are predicting the future without being adequately trained and qualified.

A single word or phrase like “loser” can carry a very heavy load of meaning, and affect us very strongly—whether someone else says it, or we use it to describe ourselves. What does it mean to say that someone is a “loser”? It may mean that someone has little financial ability or poor social skills, or some other lack.

However, using the word “loser” generalizes that to all that person’s life, when that is never the case. Someone who is described as a “loser” may have little money or status, but have many good friends, a wonderful sense of humor, a beautiful voice, etc. Using the word “loser” ignores all that, making it seem as if they have “lost” in all aspects of their life, not only now, but in the past, and in the future.

McWhirter’s pattern described above can also be used for any unpleasant overgeneralization about the self. “You’re no good,” “I can’t do anything right.” And it can also be used for any positive overgeneralizations that could also use some balance. Retrieving the unpleasant aspects of a positive overgeneralization can make them available for learning.

**Evaluations**

When we generalize about events, the words we use may be simply descriptive generalizations, like “chair” “small” or “new.” However, usually a word also expresses some kind of evaluation. A word like “small,” may carry a meaning of “insignificant,” or “unimportant,” and “new” often carries a meaning of “better.” Many other words, like “stupid,” “lazy,” or “worthless” express much more obvious evaluations.

If an internal voice were to say, “I think you’re stupid,” that might be unpleasant, but it is clearly stated as an evaluation that someone else has made about you; it is not necessarily a fact. Since it is clearly someone else’s evaluation, if you have a different view of the behavior or event that they labeled as “stupid” you can offer it.
“I think you’re stupid” also ignores the context. Someone could be very stupid in one context, and quite intelligent in another, but when the context is omitted, the statement appears to be universal—that you are stupid everywhere and all the time.

However, it is much more common for an internal voice to say, “You’re stupid,” which sounds much more like a fact than an opinion about a fact. That makes it much less clear that it is an evaluation that someone else has made about you. One way to clarify this is to reply, “OK, you think I’m stupid; what events or evidence convinced you that is true? That can begin to unravel what otherwise appears to be an undisputable “fact.”

If an internal voice says, “I’m stupid,” instead of “You’re stupid,” the evaluation sounds even more like a fact. This tight circularity of the self describing itself is a bit more difficult to disentangle. While occasionally someone may come to a conclusion about themselves on their own, almost always it is an echo of what they heard someone else say. They accepted it as true, agreed with it, and began to describe themselves in that way. Since they agree with it, it is much harder to think of alternative descriptions.

One way to begin to unravel a statement that someone makes about themselves is to change it into a statement that someone else makes about them. “Look, I’m sure that you didn’t pop into this world saying this to yourself. When you were an infant, you didn’t even understand words, much less talk to yourself—you had to learn that much later from other people around you. You may have learned to say this to yourself, but it is really what someone else said to you, so it is much more accurate to say, ‘You’re stupid’ than ‘I’m stupid.’ ”

After this first step of opening up the circular self-referring statement you can follow up with, “Who said this to you?” making it clear not only that it is someone else’s opinion, but whose opinion it is. Then you can go on to ask about the larger context, “Where are you, what just happened, and what kind of person is saying this?” etc. Thinking of all these circumstances that led to the conclusion that you were stupid offers many opportunities to spontaneously reevaluate the conclusion, and think of alternative meanings. I will explore how to use this in much more detail in volume II.

Another way to unravel someone’s troublesome statement about themselves is to realize that that the evaluation describes itself, so it applies to itself. If the self is stupid, then the statement itself must also be stupid. “OK, if I’m stupid, then saying, ‘I’m stupid’ must be a stupid thing to say.” If a voice says, “I’m a worthless person,” that statement must itself be worthless. “I’m lazy,” is a lazy statement, and “I’m insensitive” must be an insensitive thing to say.

This circularity will apply to anything that someone says about themselves. Try this now with any negative statement that you say about yourself. Think of some
general critical statement that you say about yourself, and then turn it back on itself
in this way, and you can have an experience of how the statement tends to nullify
itself. . . .

When any negative self-referring statement is applied to itself, it tends to nullify
itself; it becomes much weaker and so will your response to it. Interestingly, this
circularity has a very different effect when used with positive descriptions. If I say,
“I’m intelligent,” then logically that must be an intelligent thing to say. It might not
be true, but at least it is consistent; the statement doesn’t nullify itself. If you would
like to learn much more about this kind of self-referring statement, read chapters
5, 6 & 7 in (5, vol. 2).

Presuppositions

In everyday life, we presuppose a great deal. In writing this book I presuppose
that you can read English, and that the words I write will be meaningful to you.
Whenever we use pronouns like “he” or “she” we presuppose that a listener will be
able to “fill in the blank” with the appropriate person. If I say, “I couldn’t find the
cat,” that presupposes an “I,” a “cat,” and that I have been searching for the cat.
These ordinary presuppositions rarely cause trouble.

However, when an internal voice says something like, “I can’t believe how stu-
pid I am,” my stupidity is no longer an opinion, it becomes a presupposed fact. That
makes it much harder to recognize that it is actually still an opinion. Even when
you change that to a statement that someone else makes, “I can’t believe how stupid
you are,” it is still a presupposed fact. There are many other ways to disguise an
opinion as a fact by presupposing it. Here are just a few.

“If you were to become smart, I would be very surprised.”
“It was your stupidity that caused the problem.”
“If you were smart, that wouldn’t have happened.”
“It’s amazing how stupid you are.”
“If you were to say something smart, that would really surprise me.”

One way to recognize presuppositions would be to learn how to recognize the
31 linguistic forms that can be used to create a presupposition. (10 , pp. 257-261).
That can be very useful for anyone who works therapeutically with other people.
Fortunately there is a much easier way to detect presuppositions: Take any sentence
and negate it, and notice what is still true.

For instance, if I negate the first sentence above, that yields, “If you were to
become smart, I wouldn’t be very surprised,” the presupposition that you are not
smart is still intact. Try negating the other sentences above, and you will find that
the presupposed stupidity is still there in each of them. . . .

Of course the same linguistic structures can be used to deliver presuppositions
that are more positive and useful. If you say to a child, “I can’t believe how smart you are,” or, “It would surprise me if you became stupid,” you can presuppose their intelligence, making it much more likely that the child will accept that as a fact. Try substituting any positive word for “stupid” in the sentences above to confirm that this is true.

These are just a few of the many traps that lie in wait for us when we use words, because except for “proper nouns” like “Bill Smith,” every word is a name for a generalization. Every generalization is an overgeneralization that has these potential drawbacks. For more detail about how we generalize, and how to use this ability in a positive way, see my book, Six Blind Elephants. (5)

In the next chapter we will examine one of the most troublesome linguistic forms, negation, and its much more useful opposite, positive outcomes, and learn how to change negatives into positives, a path that can lead you efficiently from what you don’t want, to what you do want.
The word “negative” has at least two very important meanings. One of these is equivalent to “unpleasant” or “I don’t like it.” For instance, if someone said, “You’re ugly,” and you’d like people to think you are good looking, you would probably think of that as a “negative” comment. However, someone else who thinks that good-looking people are shallow might think of that as “positive.” This use of the word “negative” depends on the values of the person making the judgment.

There is another quite different use of the word “negative” that is much more specific and unambiguous, namely that a statement contains a negation. For instance, a word like “not,” “none,” or “never” (not ever) clearly indicates negation. Another form of negation is a prefix like “un-” or “in-” that means “not” as in “unmanageable” or “incompetent.”

The sentence “You’re ugly” may be unpleasant, but it does not contain a negation. However, the sentence “You’re not good looking” has a negation in the word “not.” Most people would say that those two sentences mean the same thing, but people experience them in ways that are subtly but significantly different. Try saying, “I’m ugly” and then “I’m not good looking” in turn, and pay close attention to what image you use to represent the meaning of each sentence in your mind.

If you don’t immediately notice the difference, alternate between the two sentences while you notice the images that you use to represent their meaning.

Reversing the negation in the two sentences above offers another experience of
contrast that can sensitize you to how negation works. Change “I’m ugly” to “I’m not ugly,” and then change “I’m not good looking,” to “I’m good looking” and notice how you respond differently to what is again apparently the same message.

When you hear a sentence with a negation, a very curious thing happens; you represent whatever is negated, and then that image is “canceled” “erased,” or “crossed out” in some way. Even though that image is canceled, it is in your mind briefly, and that draws your attention to it, and that tends to influence your behavior.

The familiar example “Don’t think of pink elephants” is a communication that elicits exactly what the command tells you not to do. It is self-contradictory, and no one who understands English can read that sentence and not think of pink elephants. Now that you are thinking of pink elephants, try to not think of them, and notice what you experience in response to doing this.

Most people experience an internal struggle between thinking of them and trying to not think of them. When you do this, even more attention is devoted to the struggle between these two urges than was devoted to the original pink elephants alone.

Thinking of pink elephants is relatively innocuous, and won’t lead to any behavior, except perhaps annoyance or amusement. However if you think of some action or response, like not eating a fattening food, or not feeling nervous, your images of eating and feeling nervous will tend to elicit those behaviors. Even though they are followed by a negation, those images will be in your mind, creating an urge, and the negation creates a conflict that draws your attention to what you don’t want to do even more.

For instance, many people who have “weight problems” have an internal voice that repeatedly reminds them not to eat, contributing heavily to their problem. If someone who wants to lose weight says to themselves, “Don’t think about that delicious chocolate cake in the refrigerator” that will direct their attention in a way that is likely to result in their eating the cake and gaining weight, which is what they don’t want. When they discover this internal voice, and realize how it contributes to their problem, usually their first response is to want to get rid of the voice.

Even if you were able to stop an internal voice, that would leave an empty space. Our senses and our thoughts don’t like to be idle, so something else would likely soon fill this space, and it might be something that was even more troublesome than the one you stopped.

Although trying to stop something in your mind is self-defeating, deliberately replacing it with something else is relatively easy. If you think of something you would rather think of, like orange kangaroos, or agile aardvarks, the pink elephants will simply fade away into the background of your attention—until I mention this, and you notice that you are not noticing them!
All of us sometimes talk to ourselves in negations that are not useful. For instance it is common for someone who is about to have an interview, or make a public presentation to think to themselves, “Don’t get nervous,” or “Don’t choke up.” Those sentences direct our attention to an image of being nervous or of choking up, and those images will tend to elicit exactly the feelings and behavior that we don’t want.

Whenever you discover yourself using negation in this way, you can refocus attention on something more positive that will redirect your attention. If you are getting ready for a public presentation, you can say to yourself, “Stay calm,” and if you want to lose weight you can say something like, “Eating well will lead to my being slender and feeling better.”

The other main alternative is to utilize negation in a more positive way by saying something like, “Don’t be too calm when you prepare to speak,” or “Don’t think about how great you will feel when you have reached your desired weight.” That kind of self-talk uses negation to direct your attention in a much more useful way.

Negation is very tricky process, particularly when our statements apply to ourselves, rather than only our behavior. For instance, “I am not a cruel person,” will not work well, but “I am a kind person” will. In general, it is much better to avoid using negation. However, even attending to a positive statement of what you want can sometimes be tricky.

For instance, some people want to have “self-worth” or “self-confidence,” and those sound like positive things. However, if someone feels a lack of self-worth, that is actually a negation of who they are. Then if they try to gain self-worth, that will be a negation of the original negation, creating further conflict! It usually works much better to identify the original negation of self-worth, and change that. If you would like to explore how negation works in more detail, you can read more in (7, ch. 11 & 12, or 5, ch. 2).

To summarize, it is much more useful to talk to yourself so that you attend to what you do want than what you don’t want, much more useful to attend to a solution than a problem. If you are aiming an arrow at a target, it is much more useful to attend to where you do want the arrow to go, than where you don’t want it to go. Attending to a positive desired outcome, rather than a negated problem is a very important first step.

However, the next step is to make sure that what you say to yourself will actually get the results that you want. Every culture has some folk tale like W.W. Jacob’s The Monkey’s Paw, in which someone is given three wishes. In these stories the last wish is always used to undo the damage caused by the first two. For instance, in one such tale, a hungry peasant couple are given three wishes. Since she is hungry, she immediately wishes for a salami. He is enraged that she would wish for such a trivial thing, and wishes for the salami to grow onto her nose. Then the last wish is
used to remove the salami from her nose, and they are right back where they started—still hungry, but hopefully a bit wiser. There are many other sayings with the same message of caution about what you wish for.

“There are two great tragedies in life; one is to not get your heart’s desire; the other is to get it.” (George Bernard Shaw)

“Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck.” (The Dalai Lama)

“Being frustrated is disagreeable, but the real disasters in life begin when you get what you want.” (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

“Be careful what you wish for, for some day it may be yours.”

If you specify your outcome carefully in advance, you can avoid these gloomy prophecies. Fortunately there is a systematic way to examine any desired outcome and modify it to be reasonably sure that it will be satisfying.

**Outcome Specification**

A well-specified outcome will work effortlessly and unconsciously, while avoiding possible objections, hesitations, and obstacles. To be well-formed, an outcome has to satisfy certain conditions. One of the main conditions is that it does not prevent or interfere with other desires or outcomes that you have.

The first thing to realize is that every change—no matter how wonderful it is—will result in some loss. That loss may be trivial, or it may be vitally important to you, but there will always be a “down side.” For instance, if you move to a much nicer home, that change in location may mean that you are farther from a favorite delicatessen, or closer to a noisy freeway, or it may mean that you are continually worried or stressed by a much larger financial obligation. Knowing that there will always be a “down side” to every change can alert you to search for what it is, so that you can examine it carefully in advance and not be surprised later. Once you have examined the consequences, you can either be prepared for them, or change your outcome to avoid them.

There are a number of other criteria for an outcome that will be achievable and satisfying. You can use the questions and statements in the outline below to examine any outcome that you have. If you are doing this with someone else, ask them the questions in italics. Continue to ask each question until you are satisfied that they have answered it fully, and that you know exactly what they mean. In the following, I will use the desire to speak publicly to a group as an example of an outcome.

**1. Desired state**

a. “What do you want?” “I want to speak in public without choking up and forgetting what I want to say.”

c. “Is this initiated and controlled by you?”—No magic intervention by someone else or something else that is out of your control, like winning the lottery. “No matter what the situation, I’ll be able to maintain a comfortable state, as if I were speaking to a friend, or a small group of friends.”

d. “Give me a specific sensory-based description, and/or a behavioral demonstration of what you want.” Specify it so that someone else would know exactly what you want. “I want to feel just like I am now while speaking to you. I’ll be breathing normally, feeling alert and able to remember what I want to say, and speak clearly and convincingly.” (A sensory-based description will be a criterion for all the other conditions listed below.)

e. Appropriate scope. “Give me an example of what you want.” I want to feel comfortable when speaking in sales meetings of about 10 people.” (not “I want to be comfortable in all situations.”)

f. Meta-outcome (see below). “When you have that, what will that do/get for you?” I’ll have the satisfaction of making my views known to others, and be able to affect the group process in useful ways.”

2. Evidence
a. “How will you know when you have it? What specific evidence will let you know that you have achieved it?” “I’ll be able to feel comfortable, easily recall what I want to say, and speak clearly.”

b. Appropriate and timely feedback. “What specific evidence will let you know that you are making progress toward your goal?” “I’ll see the other people attending to what I say, and their questions will indicate that they have understood what I said.”

3. Context
a. “Where, when, and with whom do you want it?” “I also want to be able to present information to a larger group of a hundred of my colleagues at national conferences.”

b. “What specific sensory-based cues will trigger the new behavior or state?” “When I realize it is time to speak, and I see all those faces turn to look at me expectantly.”

4. “Ecology (Congruence) “How will your desired outcome affect other aspects of your life, either positively or negatively? Does any part of you have any
objection to your having this outcome?” “If I were able to do this, my boss might ask me to travel to more conferences, and be away from my family more, which I wouldn’t like,” etc. Either:
   1. Limit the outcome to the appropriate contexts, or
   2. Revise the outcome so that it is appropriate in a wider range of different contexts, or
   3. Teach behavioral competence to deal successfully with the undesired consequences. (In the example above, the ability to politely and respectfully refuse the boss’ request to travel more would be an example of #3.

5. Blocks “What stops you from having your desired outcome already?” “I get nervous, and that makes my hands shake and my voice quaver, and I sometimes forget what I want to say;” etc.

6. Existing Resources “What resources do you already have that will support getting your outcome?” “I feel comfortable speaking to you, and to small groups of friends, where I have no difficulty remembering what I want to say, so I know that I’m able to do it,” etc.

7. Additional Resources “What other resources do you need in order to get your outcome?” “I need to learn how to feel comfortable in larger groups, and to find some way to remind me of what I want to say, as a backup in case I lose my train of thought,” etc.

8. Steps
   a. Path. “How are you going to get there?” “I’ll start practicing in very small groups of two or three people, and I’ll imagine that they are all close friends.”
   b. Alternatives. “Do you have more than one way to get there?” (The more alternatives the better.) “I can also start by giving little talks to my kids about dinosaurs, or by presenting accounting figures to the PTA,” etc.
   c. Chunking. “Is the first step specified and achievable? How about subsequent steps?” “I can sign up for toastmasters, where there is no risk, and I can begin by giving very short presentations, so that it is easier to remember what I want to say. Then I can make slightly longer presentations, and use file cards with cue words to help me remember,” etc.

Meta-Outcome Whenever in this process you can foresee that your outcome will have obvious troublesome consequences (murder, suicide, financial ruin, etc.), elicit the outcome of the outcome (a “meta-outcome”) by asking, “What will that
“do for you?” or “What will you get if you do that?” Keep asking until you get an outcome that you think is positive and not problematic. Finding a meta-outcome gives you flexibility in finding a specific behavior that will give you what you really want (the meta-outcome) without the drawbacks of the initial outcome that you thought you wanted.

This process of specifying an outcome can also be applied to your self-talk. There are some very important conditions that need to be met in order to specify how you can talk to yourself in a useful way. You can examine the words you say internally, to be sure that they get you what you really want, without too many significant undesired costs or consequences. In the next chapter we will be exploring how you are already talking to yourself, and how to use an extensive checklist to change that into something that will serve you much better, and take you where you want to go.
10
Asking Questions

When we ask ourselves questions, they direct our attention to different aspects of our experience. If I’m at a restaurant, and it is time to order a meal, I could ask myself a wide variety of questions, and each one would point my mind in a different direction. For instance, imagine that you are in a restaurant now, and the waiter or waitress has just handed you the menu. What question might you ask yourself? . . .

First write down your question, and then notice how that question directed your attention, and how you feel as a result of asking it. . . .

We will make use of your question later in this chapter, so if you haven’t yet written down your question, pause to do so now, so that you won’t miss out on a useful experience. . . .

I realize that it may not yet be clear what I am asking you to do, so there are some examples below. Ask yourself the following questions, one at a time, and then pause to notice how each one directs you to a different scope of experience, with a somewhat different feeling:

1. What food would I enjoy most? . . .
2. What should I order? . . .
3. What are other people ordering? . . .
4. Did I pick a good restaurant? . . .
5. What is least expensive? . . .
6. What food will feel best to me an hour from now? . . .

This is only a very small sample of the many possible questions that someone could ask in this situation. I’ll offer some general observations below, and you can compare that with your response.
The first question directs your attention to select something that will satisfy your own tastes, pleasures and preferences. Probably you will have a feeling of pleasure, as you imagine tasting the foods that you enjoy most. While choosing a meal that you will enjoy makes a lot of sense, it could result in spending more than you can afford, or result in overindulgence that you may regret later.

The second question uses a different criterion, “should” instead of your own enjoyment. Often this means choosing according to some set of rules about what you should do, which is often different from what you would enjoy. “I’d like a steak, but I should have a salad and juice so I can lose weight.” Since most people resist doing what they “should” do, you likely have a less satisfying feeling of being pushed to do something that you’d rather not do.

The third question directs your attention to what other people are ordering, rather than what would satisfy you. If you select a meal based on what others select, and they enjoy different kinds of food than you do, you will choose a meal that you may not enjoy, and might even dislike.

The fourth question directs your attention to the overall quality of the food at this restaurant. Whether you decide that the food here is likely to be good, bad, or indifferent, that is irrelevant to deciding which food to choose. However, this would be a good question to ask earlier in time, when you are deciding on a restaurant, or it might be useful if you are thinking that perhaps you made a poor choice, and you are considering moving to a different restaurant.

The fifth question directs your attention to the price, rather than to the food. While this may be a good choice if you have little money to spend, it will restrict your choices, and sometimes result in ordering something that is not enjoyable. You may feel some regret that you can’t order the food that you would choose if you had more money to spend.

The sixth question directs your attention to a future feeling of the food in your stomach—a pleasant feeling of fullness or lightness—rather than the pleasure of tasting the food. You may choose a meal that isn’t quite as pleasurable, but you will probably seldom overindulge or become overweight.

If you review your experience of these questions, you will find that each of them offers certain benefits and each of them also has certain drawbacks, and that will be true of any question that you could ask. Depending on the context, and your outcome at the moment, any of them could be useful, but each of them will also have certain disadvantages.

You may also discover that one or more of these questions seems very familiar or logical, “Oh, yeah, that makes sense,” while others seem alien or nonsensical, “I’d never ask that!” That kind of response indicates that you would typically tend to ask one kind of question, rather than another.
Now return to the question that you first asked yourself at the beginning of this chapter. Find out what you can discover about how it directs your attention, you feeling as a result, and what the potential benefits and drawbacks of this question are.

**Core Question**

A core question is a fundamental question that someone continually asks throughout the day, unconsciously organizing and directing experience in ways that can be both enabling and limiting—a powerful determinant of our skills, attitudes, and limitations. When you discover your core question, that gives you an opportunity to examine it, and change it to something more useful to you.

Since this question is one that we typically ask, regardless of the context, it is so familiar that we tend presuppose it and take it for granted, as the fish does water. It is so much a part of part of who we are that it is unconscious, so it is difficult to identify what it is. The first step in this process is to become even more familiar with the impact of different questions. The instructions below are written as an exercise to do with two other people, because you can learn so much by comparing what you do with what someone else does. But you can also do the exercise by yourself. Another way to gain a wider experience is to then take a friend through the exercise, and notice how different some of their answers are.

1. **Introduction: experimenting with examples**  Think of a context that is important to you that involves at least one other person. Keeping that context the same, experiment with several of the questions below, in order to discover how different questions alter your experience. Notice how your experience of the same event changes when you ask each question internally. Particularly notice how the scope of your attention shifts, and also any shifts in the three major sensory modalities—visual images, auditory sounds, and kinesthetic feelings.

   What can I get here?
   What do you want?
   Aren’t I clever?
   What should I do?
   Am I safe?
   Do I have a place here?
   What’s wrong?
   What do they want from me?
   Have I done everything I could have?
   Am I included?
   How does it work?
What is my place here?
Am I well?
How else could it be?
Do I want this?
How am I doing?
What’s most important?
What do I have to contribute?
Am I good enough?
Is this all there is?
Who’s in charge?
How can I help?
Do they love me?
Is it right?
What’s happening to me?
If I survive this, what’s next?
Do I belong?
How can this give me pleasure?
Will I survive this?
Am I being understood?
How could this be better?
What’s missing?
What should I do next?
How can I make the most of this situation?

Pause to share your experience of a number of these questions, and compare what you noticed with what others noticed.

2. Select a context  Now think of an example of an important context in your life: “home,” “work,” “relationship,” “children,” etc. that includes at least one other person. Notice how you represent this example in all three major modalities (images, sounds, and feelings). Also notice the submodalities of your experience—the smaller elements within each modality. For instance, the brightness, size, color, distance, moving/still, 3-D/flat of the visual image, the loudness, tonality and tempo of any auditory words or sounds, and the intensity, extent and qualities—hardness, temperature, etc.—of any tactile kinesthetic feelings you have.

3. Eliciting your core question
a. Method 1  While thinking of your experience of this major life context, ask yourself, “If there were a question, always in the back of my mind, that quietly
guided all my experience and behavior in this context, what would it be?” Imagine that this question is just underneath your conscious awareness, directing your attention, and guiding all your behavior.

Write this question down, and then think of your important life context again, and imagine asking it there. If this question changes your representation of this context, it’s probably not quite the right one. Your core question will fit the context so well that it won’t change your representation when you ask it. Try adjusting your question until you find one that fits better. . .

Now think of the opposite of your core question—whatever “opposite” means to you. Write this question down, and then notice how it changes your experience of your important life context when you imagine asking it. . .

Experimenting with the opposite of your question offers a vivid contrast for realizing the impact of a question, and it often clarifies what your question might be. You can also try the alternate method below for eliciting your core question:

3b. Method 2 Think of a profoundly altered state you have experienced that was pleasant. . .

Put yourself back into this state, experience it, and identify what makes it strikingly different from your usual experience. In an altered state the core question is either not asked or is completely answered, and this is one of the factors that makes this state altered. This altered state will be the opposite of your usual state.

For example, one man said, “When I was in that state I thought, ‘What are people afraid of?’ I was amazed that people could be scared of anything. I felt completely safe.” This indicates a core question that might be something like, “Am I safe?” or “How safe am I?” Since he usually continually focused on safety, being completely safe and not needing to test for safety was a very altered state for him. Another person said, “In that state it was very clear that there was nothing to be done; everything was perfect as it was.” The opposite of this might be something like “What shall I do next?” or “What needs to be done?”

Using these understandings, determine what is different about your altered state. . .

Then choose a core question that is the opposite of your experience in the altered state. . .

4. Try out your core question in some other major life contexts to see how well it fits there. Make any adjustments that you can think of to make it fit better in all those contexts. For instance, “What food shall I choose,” would be limited to only a few contexts, but “What should I do next” is more general, so it could be used anywhere.
5. **Share your experiences**  Share what you found in steps 3 and 4 with the other people you are doing the exercise with. . . .

6. **Experimenting and adjusting**  Next, try on the questions of the others in your group, one at a time. Notice how these different questions change your experience. When you try on these different core questions, what aspects do you like, dislike, find interesting or useful, etc.? . . .

   Again, share your experience with the others in your trio. . . .

7. **Examine a question**  As a trio, take one core question and examine it, using the *checklist* that follows, to identify possible problems or limitations. Keep in mind that a core question is a very condensed distillation that is embedded in all of a person’s presuppositions, beliefs, and ways of organizing their experience. Also keep in mind that each word in a core question can have many different meanings to different people. A question that works well for one person may work very differently for someone else. The checklist is only a way to alert you to possible limitations that you might not otherwise notice, and these can be a focus for experimenting with modifications or alternatives in the next step of this exercise.

8. **Checklist**  (items are not listed in order of importance or any other hierarchy.)

   a. **What is presupposed?**  (Negate the question and notice what is still true. An effective core question presupposes choice, ability, resources, good feelings, etc.)

   b. **What modal operator(s) are contained in the question?**  Modal operators are words that indicate *possibility, choice, desire, or necessity*—and their negations. A useful core question will usually include possibility, choice, and desire, rather than necessity or negations of possibility, choice, or desire. (For more on modal operators: sbe2, chapter 4)

   c. **What verb tense is used?**  (past, present, future, conditional, subjunctive, etc.) Since the past can’t be changed, a question directing attention to the present and future will usually be more useful in enabling choice, ability, and satisfaction.

   d. **Self/other emphasis/sorting.**  Notice pronouns: I, you, they, we, etc. Ideally there is a balance between attending to self and others, with respect and consideration for both.

   e. **Active/passive**  Is the person the active *subject* or passive *object* of the question? For instance, “What shall I do?” is active, while “What will happen to me?” is passive, and presupposes lack of choice.

   f. **Is there a negation?**  (“What’s wrong” = “not right”) Try transforming any negations into positive statements. For instance, “What’s wrong” could become, “What do I want to attend to?” or “How can I make this better?” etc.
g. Are there any comparisons? (more, less, better, best, enough, etc.) Is a comparison self/other, self/self, or other/other? Try changing or eliminating the comparison. Does a comparison offer useful feedback information, and result in useful feelings of pleasure and motivation?

h. Is it a Yes/No (digital) question, such as “Am I safe?” or an analog (continuum) question, such as “How safe am I?” Usually analog questions will be more useful.

i. Is it a spurious yes/no question that is stated so that it can only be answered in one way? For instance, “Did I do everything I could have?” or “Am I completely safe?” can never be answered “Yes” in a complex world.

j. Sensory-based Does the question direct the person’s attention toward specific sensory-based events and behavior? For instance, “What’s happening around me right now?” directs attention to specific external events, but “Am I safe?” does not.

k. Note any cause-effect (“this caused that”), equivalence (“this = that”), or context that is stated, referred to, or presupposed.

l. Which of the three major aspects of experience—behavior, thinking, and feeling—are included, omitted, or presupposed?

m. Does it contain a self-reflexive loop? “How well am I doing?” in contrast to “How well did that work?”

n. Does the question elicit motivation that is “toward,” “away from,” both, or neither? Experiment with changing this orientation.

o. Are the feelings that result from the question pleasant, unpleasant, or neither? How could you change the question to make it more pleasant?

9. Experiment with modifications or adjustments As a trio, suggest changes in the question for the person whose question it is to try out in their experience to see if they like the resulting changes.

For instance, if the original question was “Am I loved,” that is passive and a yes/no (digital) question. You could try, “What can I do to be sure she loves me?” which is more active. Or you could try, “How much am I loved?” which presupposes that you are loved, it is just a matter of degree. As they try out a modification, be particularly attentive to their nonverbal responses, which will indicate how well it does or doesn’t fit for them. Make a note of changes that the person likes.

10. Congruence check (“ecology”) Whenever you find a change that you like, and that you think you would like to have it as part of your automatic unconscious responding, test it thoroughly by imagining asking the question in all your major life contexts, being alert for any possible problems, limitations, or compli-
cations. If you notice problems, experiment to find out how you can adjust the question so that these problems don’t arise.

11. Rehearse in future contexts Assuming that you have identified one or more changes that you are congruently pleased with, rehearse the modified question in a variety of future life situations, so that the question will generalize widely and become a spontaneous unconscious response.

12. Testing/Feedback Make a promise to yourself to check a week or two in the future to find out how well these changes are working. You can always make further modifications any time you want to.

This process can be used to adjust what we say to ourselves in any problem situation, in order to make it more useful in supporting our life goals. Changes in our core question will usually generalize widely, and have a broad impact on our lives, far beyond specific problems. A live workshop presentation of this process is available on CD (6)
In this book I have collected and presented a wide variety of ways to transform negative internal self-talk, learned from over 30 years of training and researching. Much of this has come from others who have taught me, or contributed ideas, while some of it has come in little “Ahah!” moments in assisting someone, or reviewing a communication or a transcript of a session. Others I have learned from participants in seminars. All these little bits and pieces had to be collected and then fit together into a coherent whole, a process that was a further learning process in itself.

My own internal voice has been an essential ally in doing this. Sometimes I have thought to myself, “There’s something missing here.” “If this is true, then that must also be true.” “That’s not very clear; how does that really work?” “How can I say this better?” And there have also been delightful moments of discovery. “Oh, I know how that works!” “I see how these two elements relate to each other!” As this book grew, it eventually became too long for a single book, so I decided to split it into two volumes, as I did with my previous book. (5)

In this volume, I have mostly ignored the historical roots of our negative voices, focusing on the structures that the history put in place, and changing them in the present. However it can also be useful to change a voice by tracing the origin of a troublesome voice back in time, and learn more about the original context that created a negative voice.

In volume 2 of this book I go on to utilize many of the principles presented here—and some only hinted at—to develop a systematic process for communicating directly with a troublesome voice. This makes it possible to learn much more
about the voice—especially its positive intent and its understanding. With this additional information the meaning of what it says changes, so that it is even more supportive and useful, becoming a supportive ally, instead of a troublesome critic. Then you can go on to “tune up” a voice to make further changes in what it says, and how it says it, so that it is even more useful.

Steve Andreas
June 2009
More NLP Resources

If you would like more NLP resources to help you in reaching your life goals, resolve problems, or just enhance your life, here is a “short list” we think you’ll find useful:

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The question “What is NLP?” is a bit like asking, “What is Physics?” because there are so many possible ways to answer it.

One answer is that NLP is able to accomplish what the beginnings of psychology promised a hundred years ago, and never quite delivered—a practical way of understanding our thinking and our behavior that can be used to make rapid and useful changes in our lives.

Another answer is that it is the study of the structure of subjective experience, the inner workings of our minds, and how to use that knowledge to enrich our choices. Much of this structure is typically unconscious, or preconscious. However much of this structure can become conscious, altered, and then allowed to become unconscious and automatic again.

Someone once described NLP as “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on steroids” because although it is fundamentally similar in orientation, NLP makes much finer distinctions and has many specific processes, principles, and presuppositions that make change much faster.

Yet another description is that it is a collection of methods for achieving specific personal outcomes, along with a common understanding of how they all work, which can be used to develop new methods.

NLP is sometimes described as a pragmatic methodology for modeling human excellence that can be applied to any context that includes at least one human being.
Once modeled, anyone can learn the model in order to learn the skill, an example of a much-overused term, “accelerated learning.”

Someone once pointed out that “The human brain is the only self-maintaining, general purpose computer that can be manufactured by unskilled labor.” It is also the only computer that is only partially programmed at the factory, and doesn’t come with an operating manual. A child’s brain doesn’t have the kinds of programs that we have as adults, and there are no instructions about the operating system, or how to program it well.

Although there is still some disagreement about exactly what kind of computer the brain is, it is clear that we input information through our five senses, process it in a variety of ways, using our ability to remember, forecast, connect different experiences, and generalize about them, and then output behavior and responses. Our output of behavior and responses then become additional inputs to be processed, in a never-ending cybernetic process.

Since we have no operating manual—and no keyboard—each of us essentially had to program ourselves, with some help from our parents and others. Despite the best efforts of our parents, much of our programming was somewhat random, and was often the result of accidental events, some supportive and some traumatic. Much of our programming operates reasonably well, while other parts usually don’t work well at all.

So another definition of NLP is that it is an operating manual for the human brain, providing “software for wetware,” that can be used to reprogram ourselves when we are less than fully satisfied with our responses.

The descriptions given so far may already be more than most people want to read. For those who want a little more specific description of what NLP is, and how it differs from most psychology and psychotherapy, read on. . .

The Three Different Aspects of Any Field

We can use the field of knowledge and investigation known as physics as an example for understanding different aspects of NLP. Physics can be divided into three different levels:

1. A practical technology that is devoted to specific applications in the real world, from building bridges, cell phones, and spacecraft, to determining the properties of atoms, viruses, and life itself—and everything in between. This technology takes the form of recipes that tell us what to do to reach particular goals or outcomes—in the same way that a recipe for a cake is a dependable way to achieve that outcome. As Paul Valery said, “The name science should not be given to anything but the aggregate of the recipes that are always successful. All the rest is literature.”
2. A **methodology** or theory, a set of understandings that guide the further development and use of the technology. Methodology consists of all the ideas we have about the technology, how we think it all fits together. As Einstein said, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.”

One basic principle—well established by a wealth of psychological experiments—is that we can’t know objective reality, we have only a “map” of reality provided through our senses. This principle was stated by Alfred Korzybski in his book *Science and Sanity* as, “The map is not the territory.” There will always be gaps, errors, and omissions in our map. A map may be very useful and practical, but it can never fully match the reality that it attempts to describe. If it did match, it would be as complete, complex, and puzzling as the reality it describes, and it would no longer be useful as a map.

3. An **epistemology**, how we know what we know, a way of deciding what evidence to use to use to determine what is true or valid as we test both the technology and methodology. The epistemology of physics is that of scientific experimentation: testing our predictions and results in any way we can, with as many controls as we can. This testing is what distinguishes science from guesses, revelation, or superstition.

### The Three Different Aspects of NLP

1. **Technology**

Like physics, NLP also has a large number of specific patterns, recipes, and instructions that can be used to help people reach specific outcomes. It does this by making changes in our experience—in our perceptions, our thinking, our actions, and our feeling responses to events.

*Educational* applications include teaching people how to spell accurately, how to learn a foreign language quickly and fluently, how to remember facts and rules, how to be in a positive state to learn easily, and how to transform some kinds of “learning disabilities” into effective thinking and learning, etc.

*Psychotherapeutic* applications include how to transform unpleasant feelings, change unwanted habits such as smoking, overeating, or nail-biting, how to cure phobias, fears and anxieties, resolve grief, shame, guilt, and other internal conflicts, eliminate addictions, compulsions, PTSD, etc.

*Communication* applications include how to use language—both denotation and connotation, and both explicit and metaphoricto sequence and combine information for easy learning, and accurate transmission of that learning to others, how to develop rapport, how to negotiate and resolve conflicts, how to become intimate when you want to, and how to set effective boundaries, etc.

*Sports* applications include how to be motivated to stay with a training pro-
gram, concentrate fully on performance and ignore distractions, how to acquire
excellence in any sport, how to use the same thought and movement strategies that
top athletes use to achieve success, etc.

**Business** and organizational applications include how to develop creative new
alternatives for solving problems, make satisfying decisions, and detailed plans
to implement them, how to stay on track in meetings, how to identify and select
potential employees and partners who have the skills needed for the team, how to
dovetail outcomes, how to manage in a style that matches your company and
employees, etc.

2. **Methodology**

NLP has a coherent set of ideas or understandings that can be used to under-
stand the wide-ranging applications of the technology.

**Modalities.** One basic understanding in NLP is that *all* our experience consists
of either sensory-based experience in the moment, or internal representations of
sensory-based experience that are remembered from the past or forecast into the
future. We can’t know the world directly, only through the representations of
the world that we build out of what we receive through our senses. These representations
will always include one or more of the following five sense modalities: visual
images, auditory sounds, kinesthetic feelings, olfactory smells, and gustatory tastes.
While the last two modalities are very important in food selection, cooking, and
certain other contexts like personal hygiene or perfume manufacturing, most of our
thinking and responding is some combination of the three major sense modalities,
visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

These sensory modalities are the building blocks, or the “atoms,” of *all* our
experience. Even our most abstract words and conceptualizations are composed of
some combination of images, sounds or feelings. These different modalities can be
combined simultaneously in a moment in time, or they can be combined in a
sequence, rather like a linear computer program, in which, for instance, an image
of a singer is followed by the song that they are singing, followed by our feelings
in response to those sounds. We can learn how to voluntarily rearrange these
“atoms” of experience in order to resolve problems, and reach the outcomes that
we want. Let’s examine one practical application of this methodology, learning how
to spell.

**Applying the Methodology of Modalities to Technology**

*Spelling* is a simple rote memory task in which the outcome is to be able to
access a correct sequence of letters in response to the sound of a word (or in
response to an image of what a word indicates). Once that is done, the word can be
written out, or the sequence of letters can be spoken, as in a spelling bee. A poor
speller will typically use one of two methods that do not work well:

\textit{a. A Creative Speller} will try to construct a visual image of the word to be
spelled, using creative visual imagery, instead of using remembered imagery to
visualize the word exactly as they have seen it in the past. Most right-handed peo-
ple look up to their left to access the right hemisphere of their brain for visual mem-
ory, and look up to their right to access the left hemisphere of their brain for creative
visualization. Creativity is a wonderful ability to rearrange experience and develop
new possibilities, but it is not appropriate for spelling, because spelling is a rote
memory task that requires not being creative.

\textit{b. Some people will try to sound out a word auditorily, in order to elicit the
letters in response to the sounds in a word. In English this is impossible for about
40\% of words, because our very strange spelling makes it very difficult to reliably
sound them out. Despite this, many schools attempt to teach children how to spell
by sounding out words auditorily, a method called “phonetics,” a word which iron-
ically can’t be spelled phonetically!}

Phonetics works well for reading, which requires going from the written word
to the spoken word. But that is a different task than spelling, in which you have to
do the reverse, and go from the spoken word to the written word. In Spanish, all
words are written \textit{exactly} the way they sound, so spelling auditorily works well,
and is not a problem in school—it is almost impossible to find a bad speller in a
Spanish-speaking country.

\textit{Accurate Spelling.} The technology of teaching children how to spell well is
ridiculously easy. You simply tell the child to look at the word written on the black-
board, and then to close their eyes and look up to their left to see an internal re-
membered image of the word, and then notice a feeling of familiarity that lets the
child know that they have seen that word before. Then they only have to copy their
internal image of the word onto the paper, or read out the letters if they are in a
spelling bee. Even in Spanish this is more effective than sounding out the letters,
because it is much faster to get a visual image of a word than it is to listen to the
sequence of sounds. For more about the NLP spelling strategy and how to learn or
teach it, read (1, ch. 2).

\textit{Submodalities:} A further development of NLP methodology is the realization
that each of the primary sensory modalities can be subdivided into smaller param-
eters or elements, called \textit{submodalities}, each of which can also be changed to alter
our experience. If modalities are the “atoms” of our experience, submodalities are
the “subatomic particles” of experience that make the atoms of experience have
significantly different properties.

A \textit{visual} image can vary in distance from the observer, location in space, and
size. It can be flat (2-D) or 3-D (holographic), framed or panoramic, bright or dim, moving or still, color or black and white. You can be inside a memory as if an event were happening again, or you can see it as if you are an outside observer watching someone else experience that event; the same is true of your images of the future—you can be in them, or you can see yourself in them. A visual memory that is a large, close, 3-D, color panoramic movie will be much more impactful than one that is a small, distant, two-dimensional framed black and white still photograph. You can easily confirm this in your own experience by representing the same memory in those two different ways.

An auditory sound can also vary in distance from the listener, location in physical space, and loudness. It can be monaural or stereo, vary widely in tempo, tone, timbre and frequency range, and you can hear it by being inside that panoramic experience again, or being outside it, as if you were hearing it coming from a tape recorder or CD player. A sound that is loud, close, full, and panoramic will be much more impactful than one that is faint, distant, and coming from a point source. Again you can easily verify this in your experience by recalling a piece of music in both ways, and notice the difference.

A kinesthetic feeling can vary in intensity, duration and location. It can vary in temperature, pressure, texture, and extent. It can be still or moving—spreading from one location to another. It can be a surface tactile feeling or an inner emotional feeling. A remembered feeling that is intense, moving, and involving the whole body will be much more impactful than one that is weak, still, and involves only a very small part of your body. Again you can try this out in your own experience to verify that it is true by remembering the same feeling in both ways.

Modalities offer three alternative ways to represent experience, offering choice. Submodalities offer hundreds of different alternatives, which can be combined in various ways to create hundreds of thousands of alternatives, for even more choice. Let’s examine a few practical applications of this methodology.

**Applying the Methodology of Submodalities to Technology**

**Overwhelm** When we are not happy about something in our life, and conclude that we “have a problem,” often a major aspect of what is happening is overwhelm or confusion resulting from information overload. There is too much information, or it is coming too fast, for us to process it well. Imagine trying to pay attention to six people talking to you at once, and you will have a taste of one kind of overwhelm, but for some people it is even worse. Often someone may have a half-dozen movies playing in their minds simultaneously—large, close, and in bright color and loud sound. This is also true of some people who suffer from ADHD and other learning difficulties. With all those movies happening at once, it
is impossible to process it all, and that makes it very hard to notice what is happening around you, or to accomplish anything.

It is relatively easy to learn to focus on just one of those internal movies at a time, allowing the others to recede into the distance and become smaller, dimmer, black and white, and quieter. When there is only one movie to attend to in the foreground, you can more easily process that information, and then allow it to recede into the distance, so that a different movie can become foreground and be processed in turn.

**Phobia/abuse** Someone who has a phobia—or any other trauma, abuse, PTSD flashback, etc.—remembers a terrible experience by being inside it, as if they were experiencing it all over again. As a result, they have all the awful feelings that they had in the original experience. Others who have had equally horrible experiences can recall them comfortably because they see them as an observer watching a movie on a movie screen, as if it were happening to someone else. Since they are outside the experience, they don’t have any of the feelings of being inside it. Either they feel neutral, or they have the feelings that a compassionate observer might have. It is easy to teach someone with a phobia to take their memories of a terrible event and project them onto a movie screen, so that they can respond to them neutrally. (1, ch. 7)

**Grief** The structure of grief is exactly the reverse of a phobia or trauma. In a phobia, someone remembers a horrible experience by being inside it, so they have all the awful feelings again. In grief, someone remembers a wonderful experience by being outside it, so they can’t feel the treasured feelings that they previously had with the dead person, leaving them with only an empty feeling. Since the structure of grief is the reverse of a phobia, the resolution for grief is also the reverse—to remember being with the dead person by being inside their special memories of them, so that they can easily re-experience all the good feelings that they once had with them. (1, ch. 11)

3. The epistemology of NLP is fundamentally the same as that of physics, and all of science. We discover what is true through experimentation and testing, and this is a process that may pause, but never stops, and is continually used to expand, revise, and enrich the field. Every pattern or method in NLP includes ways to test whether each step has been successful or not, using nonverbal response as the primary feedback, along with verbal report.

However, most of NLP has only been tested “clinically” in the experience of those who have made changes in their lives. This is also true of most psychology and medical practice. It has not yet been rigorously tested in controlled experiments, and the same is true for the majority of other therapeutic and even medical interventions.
NLP has been developed outside academia, where most research takes place, and those who are most active in the field have been busy developing the methodology, discovering new ways to help people make changes. The kind of rigorous research that would validate NLP takes a great deal of time, money, and subjects, and it simply has not yet been done. However, many of the patterns in NLP could be tested far more easily than other psychological approaches, because each step of each process specifies both the intervention to be made, and how to evaluate whether or not that step has been successful. In addition, most NLP patterns achieve outcomes dependably, often in a session or two, which would greatly shorten the process of testing and follow-up.

Even though NLP is in its infancy—only some 35 years old—it already includes a wide range of practical processes, as well as a consistent and coherent methodology that underlies the specific methods. These broader understandings provide a framework for developing new methods and evaluating them. This methodology can also be used to understand methods that have been developed by other people intuitively, or out of a different orientation, to discover how they work, and how to improve them.

I have been teaching NLP processes at national psychotherapy conferences for many years, and observing as many other presenters as I can, especially when they are willing to actually demonstrate what they do. In almost all cases, what I can do with NLP is vastly superior, and much faster and more thorough than other approaches. As the field continues to develop and differentiate, we are able to do much more every year.
About the Author

Steve Andreas was introduced to NLP in 1977, and was one of the first small group of people to be certified by the original co-developers, Richard Bandler and John Grinder as NLP practitioner, master practitioner, and trainer in 1979, along with his partner, Conirae. He and Conirae co-edited four of the early classic Bandler/Grinder books, *Frogs into Princes*, *Trance-formations*, *Reframing*, and *Using Your Brain—for a CHANGE*. Steve and Conirae together wrote *Heart of the Mind*, and *Change Your Mind—and Keep the Change*. Steve has also written *Virginia Satir: the patterns of her magic*, modeling how Satir used NLP principles in her work with families, and *Transforming Your Self: becoming who you want to be*, modeling the structure of self-concept and how to change it quickly and easily.

His most recent two-volume book, *Six Blind Elephants: understanding ourselves and each other*, again demonstrates that he continues to be one of the foremost thinkers advancing the development of the field. This book presents a “unified field theory” of NLP and personal change, based on the well-researched field of cognitive linguistics. This book shows how all the different methods of change work—whether described as NLP or not—can be understood as resulting from changing one or more of three fundamental process variables:

1. The scope of sensory-based experience that we attend to,
2. The way we categorize that scope of experience, and
3. The logical level of the categorization.

In addition to his books, Steve has published numerous articles on NLP-related topics in various publications including the *Psychotherapy Networker*, (formerly the *Family Therapy Networker*) and the *Milton H. Erickson Foundation Newsletter*. 
He has also produced over 50 DVD and CD demonstrations of NLP patterns. He continues to model and write about new NLP patterns and understandings at his home in the foothills of the rocky mountains near Boulder, Colorado.

Steve earned a BS in Chemistry from Caltech in 1957, and an MA in psychology from Brandeis University in 1961. He taught psychology and social science at a junior college in California from 1962-1970, and did Gestalt Therapy from 1967-1977. He edited Fritz Perls’ *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* and *In and Out the Garbage Pail*, and wrote *Awareness: exploring, experimenting, experiencing*—all under his previous name, John O. Stevens, which he changed in 1981 when he married Conning Andres, and took her last name.

Steve maintains a blog at: http://realpeoplepress.com/blog/ and a web site at:
http://www.steveandreas.com/

Many of Steve’s NLP products can be found at Real People Press:
http://www.realpeoplepress.com/

Many other NLP products can be found at NLP Comprehensive:
http://www.nlpco.com/
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