



I've spent 20 years in therapy but was any of it worthwhile?

By JACI STEPHEN

Journalist Jaci Stephen
writes about her life changing
experience of therapy with her
Neurolinguist Psychotherapist
Martin Weaver

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"Basically, your personality has been so badly constructed, the only thing to do is knock it down and start again." That, 18 years ago, was my first introduction to therapy. I had left a teaching job in Wales and arrived in London to pursue my dream of being a full-time writer. I knew just two people, both actors, and we shared three rooms in a bedsit in Archway.

I was, and had been for some years, very depressed following the breakdown of a long-term relationship. Now I had no job, few friends and £17 a week to live on in the country's most expensive city. The Tavistock Clinic had been suggested as the ideal place to go to find out exactly what kind of therapeutic treatment might suit my condition.

It was after three interview sessions that I received the scathing assessment of my personality. I thought I was basically OK. I enjoyed a happy childhood and had no doubt about the path I wanted to take; but I hated living with depression and, although many believe that depression aids creativity, it suffocated mine.

The Tavistock reckoned that full-time analysis was the answer, and so off I went, five days a week, to begin the reconstruction programme. As I was effectively unemployed, they charged me just £1 a session; the four buses it took me to get there and back meant going without meals, but I thought it would be worth it. The therapy room was dominated by a couch, on which I had to lie facing away from the analyst - the position in which Sigmund Freud required his patients to be.

The only power you can exercise is to listen to the scraping of the analyst's pen and come up with interesting things you hope will encourage it to go faster. When it stops, you feel you've lost your audience. For weeks I had to lie there and talk about a dream in which I lost a suitcase. Suitcases featured in many of my dreams, not least because I was always travelling and I lived in fear of leaving one behind.

To my mind, there was no message there; just anxiety. And yet the American psychiatrist I was seeing became obsessed with my 'baggage'.

She also, true to traditional psychoanalytical form, became obsessed with the fact that on a Friday I resented the idea that I wouldn't see her over the

weekend, and on a Monday was resentful that she had been away. To be honest, I never gave her a second thought. The idea that this might be lurking in my unconscious I thought totally irrelevant at a



time when I was spending weekends visiting my dying father. But it was my small bladder that finally made me quit.

The journey to the analyst was so long that I was always desperate for the loo when I got there. One day I arrived to find it occupied.

If I waited for the person to come out, I reasoned, I would be late for the session and would be told I was trying to avoid what we were talking about the day before; if I go into the session, I will have to leave halfway through and will be told I am avoiding what we are talking about today. So I hit upon plan C, went in, explained the situation and asked if there was another loo I could use.

"I wonder," said the analyst later, "if your wanting to use a different lavatory is because you want to invade my privacy in the way you feel I'm invading yours".

That was the end. It was too ridiculous for words.

Next, I went to see a therapist in Hendon, in North-West London, who wouldn't shut up about her own life. Then a counsellor in North London. One day I rang the Samaritans, but they didn't answer.

My depression did not go away, despite my having spent six months in five-days-a-week analysis, and

another six months trying out different options. But I continued to work, swimming against the emotional tide and persuading myself that this is what all struggling artists had done since the beginning of time.

When I heard of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) seven years ago, I didn't have a good word to say about talking treatments that purported to help people in emotional difficulty. Despite having made a success of being a writer and broadcaster in London, feelings of failure and often overwhelming depression were still never far away.

Like many Welsh people, I suffered a huge lack of confidence; I genuinely believe that insecurity is rooted in history, but it manifests itself quite dramatically in personal form.

Inside, I was still that little person from Cardiff who would never feel deserving of sitting alongside people I perceived to be my superiors. I come from a background where my grandfather crossed the road and doffed his cap if he saw the vicar approaching. One evening, after I had drunk too much, a friend who had heard my expressions of suicidal despair once too often, said: "Go on, then, do it, if that's what you really want. Or you could dial this number and see Martin Weaver."

The friend went on to explain how, some years previously, he'd hit rock bottom following a disastrous relationship - and yet by the time I got to know him, he was one of the funniest, vibrant, brightest and most successful people I'd met.

After explaining the basic principles of NLP - to communicate better with others and manage thoughts, moods and behaviours more effectively - I decided to give it a go. It turned out Martin was a chap from West London who charged £50 an hour, which was not enough to put me off calling. He asked why I wanted to come to him and I said: "I'm not happy." There. I'd said it. Nobody before had ever asked me *why* I wanted to see a therapist; I had just told them what my symptoms were, they accepted them, and doled out whatever treatment they thought appropriate.

When I was 16, the doctor put me on Valium for migraine and depression. As a student, it was anti-depressants and sleeping tablets. One analyst thought a couple of decades more treatment would solve everything, and on it went. Martin, however, said that he would know within 20 minutes if NLP was the right treatment for me, and when I finally went, those 20 minutes were the most nerve-racking of my life. What if I wasn't good enough for it? What if Martin didn't like me? What if my

personality was unravelling even more than it had been when I first visited the Tavistock years before?

But Martin's therapy room made me feel comfortable at once: there was an armchair, water, and a box of tissues that I would need in the coming weeks. And always, outside the window, Chiswick's greenery and always, bizarrely (or maybe I imagined this), the sun shining through.

One of the first things I remember saying to Martin is: "Happiness is difficult for me." He asked me to tell him why I thought that was so. "Well, it just is," I responded. Although, as a writer, I consider myself articulate, now I found having to explain myself extremely difficult. Everything I said seemed to make logical sense to me - happiness is difficult, depression is central to creativity, I need to live in four places - London, Cardiff, Paris, Spain. I called one home, one an office, one a holiday home, and one a drunken purchase after too many champagnes on the BMI flight from Cardiff to Malaga. They were all bolt-holes, escapes. But when all that was repeated in the mouth of someone else, they sounded like the words of an idiot.

That is not how Martin repeated them back to me, though, and his gentle, bemused manner enabled me to laugh at much of what I had thought were immovable problems.

Finding the right therapist is, of course, crucial to the success of treatment, as is finding the right therapy. What I particularly liked about NLP was the way it made me think in relation to the world and other people: the premise is that you cannot change others and their behaviour, only your response. I began to realise that so much distress in my life was related to constant feelings of being unable to control the way life unfolded around me, and NLP offered solutions. As I continued to see Martin and understand more about how I related to those around me, it was rather like looking through a kaleidoscope and, with one twist, seeing all the pieces fall into a new pattern.

It works with both big and small issues. In one session, I was expressing irritation at my mother in restaurants, always fishing about in her purse for £8.50 for her lasagne, when I am perfectly able to treat her. "So let her pay for her lasagne," said Martin. Easy. I told my mother, who is a therapist, about this. She has a great sense of humour and said: "Pay for my own lasagne? Some of these therapists are rubbish."

The bigger issues were harder. For 30 years, I carried around the weight of a failed relationship

which I had always said "ruined my life". What I learned quickly in my sessions with Martin was that "it" had not "ruined" me, but that I had taken an active part in allowing it to. This was the most difficult aspect of my treatment, and I blamed myself for having surrendered so much time and energy to a part of my life that was unchangeable. But what I could change was my response to it. Painful as this was, there was a Damascus-like moment when Martin asked me to imagine what it would be like to be free of the anger, and so much else besides. My God: to be free of it. What would it feel like to be that person?

But so much of me *was* it. Wasn't it? Hadn't these feelings shaped my character? Wasn't my past who I was? Would I be able to cope in the outside world without it? Learning to feel forgiveness, both towards others and myself, was central to my experience of NLP.

At Martin's sessions, I loathed being made to stand up and walk to another "spot" in the room in order to see a situation from another's point of view; I felt stupid. But it was one of the most valuable exercises I did. Now, when I am frustrated or angry with someone, in my head I walk to their spot and consider their feeling and their motivation for doing what they are doing. That way, it is possible to empathise with someone else's fear, anger or loneliness, and to understand that in the end, we are all just human.

Seeing Martin was the best £550 I have ever spent. The things I learned with him I can apply to all areas of my life, always asking myself the question that Martin used to ask of me: What's the real issue here? The real issue is rarely what you think it is, and exploring the heart of it makes for a life of astonishing clarity and contentment.

Recently, I returned to Martin, not because I was depressed, but because I was still living a chaotic existence between four places and wanted to streamline my life. We spoke mainly about identity; and Wales, where I was born, featured heavily. I became irritated as he talked about the possibility of going back there to redefine my relationship with a place that I often love, but often dislike. Where did this new irritation come from? I suspect it was because what I thought I wanted, and what was actually right for me, were entirely different.

Martin was relentless in pursuit of this issue being addressed. What I wanted was for him to tell me to chuck in my job, move to Paris and live writing novels in a garret. What I did was follow his advice and re-explore my relationship with Wales,

buy a gorgeous house there and leave Paris and London.

Since settling back in Cardiff, in a house that I love, I have met many wonderful people and have never been happier. Whoever said happiness was difficult?

The means of coaching myself to react more positively to the world that Martin put in place were also instrumental in a major breakthrough a few weeks ago. Realising that I was using alcohol as a buffer against stress, I applied his techniques in a bid to stop for good. I applied his logic and asked myself what life as an alcohol-free person would feel like. I wrote a list of all the benefits not drinking would bring me: there were about 20. The reason not to give up was one: it's boring not to drink. I could hear what Martin would say: "Tell me why it's boring not to drink." I would have no answer to that. Recently, my work situation changed dramatically, and I know that without NLP I would have handled the situation very differently. In the past, I would have been angry, and that anger would have incapacitated me.

But what I did this time was to preserve what would have been wasted energy and pursue other avenues; I took on different work and am enjoying new challenges, finally getting on with the books I always promised to write.

There are people who say Neuro Linguistic Programming is just positive thinking. It's the "just" that makes me laugh, because being positive is a great state to be in.

Since we first met, I have sent many people to Martin, all of whom have had their lives changed as a result. Other therapies do different things for different people, and I have changed my view that all therapy is a load of hogwash and a waste of time that could be better spent swilling down one's problems with a few pints of lager.

But what I, and those of my friends who have benefited from Neuro Linguistic Programming, perceive, is that many people spend too long in time-consuming therapies and are no happier as a result.

NLP is not a quick fix or a sticking plaster over a wound; for me, it provides a framework for living without each day being a minefield of emotional trials. And for someone who, seven years ago, didn't want to be alive, that is some achievement.

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