

The Role of Moods in NLP

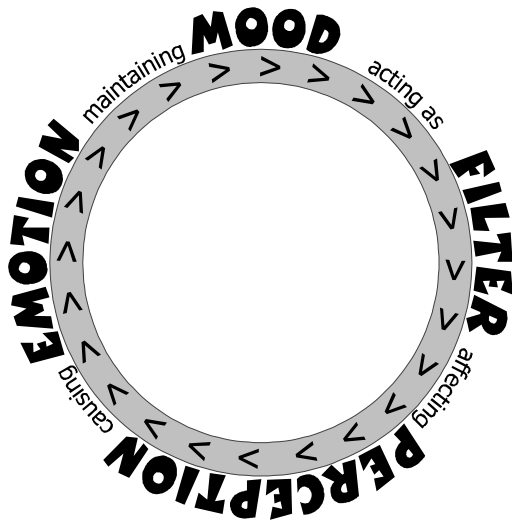
By Joe Cheal MSc

Moods, as background experiences, are rarely referenced within the NLP literature. This article explores how research on moods from the 'emotional intelligence' literature relates to what is already available within NLP. There are also some suggestions for interventions we might use to work through problematic moods and to transition to more resourceful moods.

Moods and Their Effect

Emotions come and emotions go, but moods seem to linger longer. According to Paul Eckman (2004), whilst emotions will tend to be fleeting, lasting for seconds or perhaps minutes, moods tend to be longer term (e.g. hours and days). Moods could be described as medium-term background feelings that set a context for our short-term emotions. The background mood acts like a filter on our emotions, making it easier to feel certain things and less easy to feel other things, for example, when in an irritable mood, we tend towards the emotion of anger. In acting like a filter, perhaps the purpose of mood is to keep us in a ready state, with faster access to particular emotions and physiological reactions. A mood of nervousness, for example, might be useful in a threatening context as it helps to heighten the individual's awareness.

Not only does mood seem to prime us for the corresponding emotion, it may also encourage us to look for things that match the mood and experience internal dialogue that reinforces the mood. For example, if we are feeling irritable, we are perhaps more likely to notice things in the 'outside world' that annoy us and tell ourselves how irritating things are. Hence we have a looping self fulfilling prophecy that will be 'positive' or 'negative' depending on the individuals' subjective experience:



Mood Loops: A Positive Example

If Fred is feeling cheerful, he is less likely to notice 'non-cheerful' things and more likely to notice things that make him happy, hence maintaining the mood of cheerfulness.

The fact that mood changes over time must surely indicate that the loop can be interrupted and replaced by another loop on a regular basis. This could be due to a physiological, emotional and/or cognitive interruption generated internally, externally or both (e.g. Goleman 1996).

Is Mood Like a State?

From an NLP perspective, although we do not usually use the terms 'emotions' and 'moods', we do refer to 'states'. In everyday usage, a state tends to refer to a condition of mind or feeling, i.e. a state may well simply be an emotion. In NLP usage, however, a 'state' or 'state of mind' refers to a more multi channel experience, complete with our internal sensory representations (e.g. visual, auditory and kinaesthetic). Robert Dilts (2000, p1300) defines a state as "a gestalt of the neurological processes (mind and body) within an individual at any given time... An individual's state filters or affects the final result or interpretation of his or her experience."

What are the connections and/or differences between state and mood? Linguistically, we talk about being 'in a state' and being 'in a mood' as if using the metaphor of state and mood as a container of some kind. We are less likely to talk about being 'in' an emotion however, and more likely to say we are 'having' an emotion. This gives the impression on a metaphor level that we are holding the emotion rather than it holding us. Whilst this is not necessarily conclusive or absolute, it does give us a linguistic differentiation between mood and emotion and connection between mood and state.

The NLP version of a state would usually include emotion but does it include mood? On the one hand it would appear so, since mood would be part of the 'gestalt of the neurological processes'. However, a state will only capture a 'snap-shot' of the ongoing background mood as it is experienced at that moment in time. We might say that a mood is not the same as a state but, like an emotion, it is *part of* a state.

If emotion is part of a state and mood primes emotion, surely mood would also prime us for particular corresponding states, making it easier to access some states and less easy to access others? If someone is experiencing a mood of happiness, it would seem easier to access a joyous state.

Is Mood a Meta State?

According to Hall (2008,p388) a meta-state is “a mental or emotional state of awareness about another state” and so may include feelings, thoughts, evaluations, judgements, beliefs and values about that state. Whereas a state is a primary experience, a meta-state will sit at a higher logical level, being a state about a state.

Since mood appears to prime, inform and govern our emotion, might we argue that mood sits at a higher logical level than emotion? Does experiencing happiness, for example, sit at a higher logical level than feeling happy?

Drawing from the work of Robert Dilts, Hall (2001,p82) separates out five criteria for logical levels:

- 1) There is a *hierarchy* of experience.
- 2) Higher levels organise and control information on lower levels
- 3) Higher levels will necessarily affect lower levels
- 4) Lower levels will not necessarily affect higher levels (although it is possible)
- 5) Higher levels encompass and impact more than lower levels.

Perhaps the first two points are debatable. By saying that mood is background to emotion's foreground are we talking about a hierarchy? Can we really say that moods organise and control emotions? Points 3 and 4 seem closer to the relationship between emotion and mood, although it would seem plausible that someone could have a cheerful feeling during a 'down' mood. We might say that mood acts a kind of 'magnetic' influence on emotion but is not necessarily an absolute force. With regard to point 5, can we say that mood is more encompassing and has more impact on us than emotion? Perhaps, if viewed over a long period of time, but emotions (as foreground experience) would seem to be stronger at a specific moment in time.

Is mood a meta-state? It would appear not. As well as only loosely fitting some of the criteria for being a higher logical level, if a mood is not the same as a state, it cannot really be defined as a state about a state. As suggested previously, it may be more helpful to say that mood can be *part of* a state or a meta state.

Whether mood is simply part of a state, a meta-state or something else entirely, if we accept that mood primes us for corresponding emotions, an intervention may be short lived if it changes only a person's state but does not change the background mood. If transitioning into a more resourceful mood primes us for more resourceful emotions and states, then it would seem beneficial to consider some 'mood management' ideas and interventions.

Getting out of the Mood: Changing States?

Most NLP interventions follow a similar pattern of eliciting the problem state and context, breaking state, eliciting an outcome state and resources and then associating the resources to the problem state (Overdurf & Silverthorn 2009). Because mood can last hours and days, it may not fit specific contexts (although the trigger for a change in mood might if it were possible to find it). Often, a mood is problematic because the person is 'in' it and they don't want to be in it. They are already associated to their problem state/mood and need to get out.

Goleman (1996) suggests that mood can change as a result of physiological, emotional and/or cognitive interruptions generated internally, externally or both. If a mood can be interrupted might a 'break state' be enough? Maybe if it is significant or strong enough. If remembering what we had for breakfast isn't strong enough to change our background mood, perhaps jumping up and down making a noise like a gorilla might be. It will no doubt depend on the intensity and 'depth' of the mood. It is also feasible that whilst states can be interrupted and changed through a 'break state', moods could revert back if the ongoing conditions (e.g. context, environment) remain the same.

As well as interrupting or 'breaking' the mood, the key perhaps is in determining a *replacement mood that is more resourceful*. What mood would they like to be in? As soon as we have helped someone out of their mood, this would then seem the appropriate point to help associate them *into a new desired mood*. NLP is an outcome oriented process and working with mood is no different. In focussing on their desired outcome (i.e. what they want) as opposed to the problem (i.e. what they don't want), the person is likely to begin accessing the desired mood.

The following approaches are aimed at getting the person 'out' of their problematic mood with a view to associating them into a resourceful mood.

Getting Meta to the Mood: 'Meta-moods' and 'Meta-states'

According to Mayer & Gaschke (1988), a 'meta-mood' concerns someone's thoughts and feelings about their moods. Mayer and Gaschke, authors in the field of Emotional Intelligence, also refer to meta-moods as meta-experience or reflective experience of mood. As reflective experiences, meta-moods could be thoughts or feelings about moods. An individual might feel irritable and then get annoyed with themselves for feeling irritable and the annoyance here would be considered a meta-mood. Alternatively, someone may feel irritable and then reflect on the cause of that irritability and this would also be considered a meta-mood.

Mayer & Gaschke (1988, p106) divide meta-mood experiences into three cognitions that:

- 1) monitor mood (eg. 'I know exactly how I'm feeling'),
- 2) evaluate it (eg. 'I'm ashamed of how I'm feeling'),
- 3) try to change it (eg. 'I'm thinking good thoughts to cheer myself up').

They suggest however (p110) that "mood-change experience is relatively rare in comparison with mood monitoring and evaluation. This makes a kind of sense: If simply deciding to cheer up always worked, sad moods would easily disappear and sad people would be rare."

Within their definition, Mayer and Gaschke do not appear to account for meta-moods as being 'moods about moods', which is a more probable interpretation from an NLP perspective. It could be argued that Mayer and Gaschke's 'meta-mood' is really a meta-state about mood.

Hall (2001, p14) discusses what he has called the Meta States Model and this model "proposes that we have states about our states, and that many of the feeling states that trouble us are the result of tangling ourselves in these recursive loops." For example, we feel annoyed about feeling stupid about feeling anxious. It is important here to 'detangle' the meta levels rather than thinking of them as the same. The point of understanding meta-levels is to be able separate an issue out and to work through it at the appropriate level.

As with anything involving a meta-level or meta-state, the meta-mood will sit at a higher logical level to the original mood. This means that working at the level of meta-mood may help us to manage the mood itself more easily and effectively. Sometimes, trying to

resolve or change a mood from within (or at the same level as the mood) is a less-than-easy task. Mayer and Gaschke (1988, p102) argue that a meta-mood as a “regulatory process is potentially important because, unlike mood, it may be directly under the individual’s control and may directly modulate mood itself.”

In going meta to mood, an interesting intervention may be to elicit the submodalities (see Bandler & MacDonald 1989) of the mood and then make changes. For example, what would happen if we were to map across the submodalities of cheerfulness to our current situation? The challenge is to get to the background mood itself rather than just the foreground state. Perhaps Mayer and Gaschke's concept of meta-moods may be helpful to us here. Changing a mood is going to be significantly easier when first disassociated (even just cognitively) from that mood. I have also found that it is possible for people to access the submodalities of a desired mood through being in second or third perceptual position (i.e. disassociated). If working with a client, Fred, this can be done by asking: “And how does the Fred who is cheerful see the world? Colour or black and white...etc”. Even when a person cannot access the mood directly, they seem to be able to elicit the submodalities of the mood from a disassociated position. Interestingly, I have found that in the process of eliciting the desired mood, people often begin to associate into it.

Reframing

As a meta-state, thinking (and talking) about a problematic mood will tend to have an impact. What we think and say is likely to affect our emotions and moods, especially over a period of time. How our moods are affected will depend on the manner of internal or external dialogue. Thinking and talking with a focus on the mood as a problem may perpetuate the mood. Alternatively, finding meaning, understanding or purpose in the mood and situation may help us shift to feeling more resourceful and in control.

The NLP technique of reframing may be invaluable here in helping someone gain a resourceful meta-perspective to their mood and current situation. In countering depressive moods, Goleman (1996, p72) suggests that: “Two strategies are particularly effective in the battle. One is to learn to challenge the thoughts at the centre of rumination – to question their validity and think of more positive alternatives. The other is to purposely schedule pleasant, distracting events.” He later adds (p74) that: “One of the most potent... antidotes to depression is seeing things differently, or *cognitive reframing*.”

In Cognitive Therapy, there is a process called a 'Thought Record' which involves of writing down one's experience in order to get a meta perspective and reframe that experience (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995). The 'Thought Record' involves writing down:

the context, a label for the mood/feeling and a rating of its intensity (%), associated thoughts, evidence for 'hot' thoughts (generalisations), counter-evidence, an alternative/balanced thought and then another rating (%). It would appear that the purpose of this process is to challenge the thoughts and generalisations supporting the mood with counter-evidence and then encouraging a new more resourceful generalisation.

Some more traditional therapies and counselling processes seek to find the cause/why/reason behind a problem. In this way, it is argued, the client can gain insights into the problem and feel better (or perhaps more in control). Huy (2002) cites knowing the cause of discomfort as a strategy for handling emotions as it "has been found to reduce anxiety levels and panic attacks among patients because it mitigates their fear of losing control."

Hall (2001, p73) suggests: "Certainly understanding causes, processes, contributing factors, sources, etc. sometimes plays a therapeutic role in our minds-and-emotions. If in response to the why, we respond with greater insight and ability to take effective action, then the why question can work creatively and resourcefully... Sometimes awareness does bring about relief and even transformation.". But he goes on to caution: "Yet it does not always do so. Perhaps, not even usually. More typically, the *exploration of the why creates more of a problem-focus so that it increasingly solidifies us in our problem or negative state...* it locates a person even more solidly inside the very frames-of-reference that create the problem."

Whilst in NLP we tend to steer away from asking 'why', we do sometimes reframe to seek the 'positive intention' of a situation. It would appear that this frame can help people to make sense of their situation and move from being 'at effect' to being 'at cause'.

Changing and Denominalising our Language

In understanding our language around moods and emotions, is it more helpful to an individual to use the verb 'to feel' instead of 'to be' – for example "I feel sad" as opposed to "I am sad"? It seems like our language encourages us to experience emotions and moods as a complex equivalence at the level of our identity (e.g. "I am sad" means "I = sad"). In addition, our language encourages us to turn emotions and moods into things rather than processes. In order to help denominalise an emotion or mood, might we use the term 'feeling' instead of 'feel'. Or might we *have* a feeling or be *having* a feeling? I have a feeling of sadness? What is the verb form of sad? Perhaps we need some more vocabulary around emotions and moods to help 'verb-alise' and express them effectively!

With regards to mood, we also use the phrase “I am *in* a mood” as if the mood is a container of some sort. No wonder we sometimes feel we cannot escape it. Might we say: “I am going *through* a mood” instead? And perhaps in order to speed that process up we might consider the ‘drop through’ technique (e.g. Bodenhamer & Hall 1997), which tends to lead the person *through* problematic states into a stronger more resourceful place.

Associating into Resourceful Moods

How might you associate someone to more resourceful moods? As a starting point, consider what moods they would find resourceful: Happiness? Excitement? Peacefulness? Anticipation? Receptiveness? Enthusiasm?

Since mood is a part of a state, mood change could be achieved *through* state change. The key is in a longer term focus, so that the person does not fall back into the old mood when the resourceful state has passed.

Having identified a resourceful mood, you could use Dilts' Logical Levels model (Dilts 1990) for a framework of questions:

- When and where do you experience this resourceful mood?
- What is it like to be in this mood?
- What do you feel and do when you are in this mood? What do you say to yourself?
- What are you capable of? What interests you?
- What is true for you? What is important to you?
- Who are you?
- Who else do you think of?

As the person answers the questions, listen out for ‘hot’ words that seem to be associated with the desired mood. Help them to associate to the resourceful mood (e.g. happiness): “And you know what it's like to be in that place of happiness now, don't you?” Use their ‘hot’ words back to them, with any submodality changes you have elicited e.g. “And so *things are brighter* and you're feeling *lifted* and *light*.” In this resourceful place, have them come up with things they could do and perhaps places they could go to maintain their new desired mood. If they are aware of what triggered the old mood, you could use their new mood/state to collapse the anchor (as long as their new resourceful mood and state is strong), e.g. “and how do you feel about that [*trigger*] now?”

Conclusion

Whilst moods are not currently central within the NLP field, they appear to have a significant impact on our well-being. This is, in part, because they prime us for associated emotions and states, and also because they are longer term experiences. Perhaps a focus on mood interventions may prove to help us experience more resourceful states more of the time.

Biography

Joe Cheal has been working with NLP since 1993. As well as being a master trainer of NLP, he holds an MSc in Organisational Development and NLT, a degree in Philosophy and Psychology, and diplomas in Coaching and in Ericksonian Hypnotherapy, Psychotherapy and NLP. He is also a licensed EI practitioner.

Joe is a partner in the GWiz Learning Partnership (www.gwiztraining.com), working as a Management & Organisational Development Specialist.

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