

# Rocking the Crone: Using NLP to Support Mindful Ageing for Women

New international resources on the ANLP website



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Several years ago, I invited my first NLP mentor, then aged 75, to guest present on one of my courses. Over dinner, she leaned in and said, with a smile and a twinkle: "Well, Jan, let me tell you about my long-term future plans..."

If we are fortunate, we get to grow older. Getting older is nature's way, the impermanence of life most vividly illustrated, entailing, in some form, a more or less gentle physiological degeneration of mind and body. Blessed with the facility of reflection, humans mark out stages of that life journey through various means. In western countries, birthdays ending in a zero are ascribed significance. In some parts of the world, people don't know the date of their birth. Cultures differ across time and place. For example, coming of age might be marked by the physiological onset of puberty, or by socially constructed notions of 'teenage' and adulthood. Biological and social

frames of reference abound.

Humans are blessed with the capacity for retrospection and future planning, within which resides a whole imaginarium through which we filter the inevitable time-related transformations through which we shall pass. As we imagine 'older', so we construct images and mental rehearsals of what that may mean. We distinguish between getting older and ageing. The former is non-negotiable as long as we have a beating heart. The latter refers to how we get older.

I consider life a cocktail, created from genetics, environment, experiences, attitude, competencies, beliefs and perspectives. We cannot control everything. Yet, to quote Viktor Frankl, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." (Frankl, 1962)

What better practices to support our choices than NLP and mindfulness?

Over the last three years I have enjoyably and passionately created programmes to support women through various aspects of the ageing process. While all people age, and are welcome to use the programmes, I focused on women to recognise the idiosyncrasies pertinent to the gender.

My approach is discursive, sharing ideas, information and the tools, philosophies and practices of NLP and mindfulness. The programmes aim to bust unresourceful myths and entail creating and affirming intentional futures, discovering and harnessing internal resources, and empowering attitudes around what ageing can mean. It is about co-authoring your long-term future.

### Myth busting

Many women, as they age, feel trapped by narratives in which they are object rather than subject, and which repeat in diverse contexts. Narratives matter, impacting neurological pathways, reverberating somatically, influencing how we make meaning. How we speak about ageing, whether to ourselves or others, shapes expectations, confidence and well-being.

In the big picture, narratives are embedded in cultural mythologies, both traditional and new. I intentionally named my signature course *Rocking the Crone*. (You can find an audio overview to the thinking behind the course at [bit.ly/447TICq](http://bit.ly/447TICq)) The term 'crone' in the English-speaking world originated in the 13th century, and equates old women with cantankerous, dangerous and ugly. We might wonder what filters dominated to arrive at this conceptualisation. For now, we might simply ask, "According to whom?" I chose 'crone' to reclaim the notion of the old woman as being wise and of value.

In contemporary western society, the old equivalence is exploited on a vast scale within a global market. Old women in their natural state are often presented as physiologically unappealing and are marginalised in many ways. The presentation is subliminally sustained through the language of avoidance. Looking old or having wrinkles is discouraged, while retaining lifelong youthful looks is positioned within a powerful 'anti-ageing' culture. My programmes sit within an emerging body of work that challenges this discourse. Within them, we work with the deep structural construction of our self-perception and build resources to put us at cause of our own natural process and well-being.

Within this process I use NLP to support individuals to uncover and re-shape distortions. There is evidence, for example, that young women's expectations of what ageing will be like are surprisingly negative, much more so than the expectations of young men; while there is also evidence that single women over the age of 75 suffer less from depression than any other group. Yet to live a life with the expectation that walking nature's path will necessarily be an increasingly negative experience seems to me to be paving the way for unnecessary obstacles. The mood of the programmes is to help reduce internal conflict. Women can create more resourceful personal narratives.

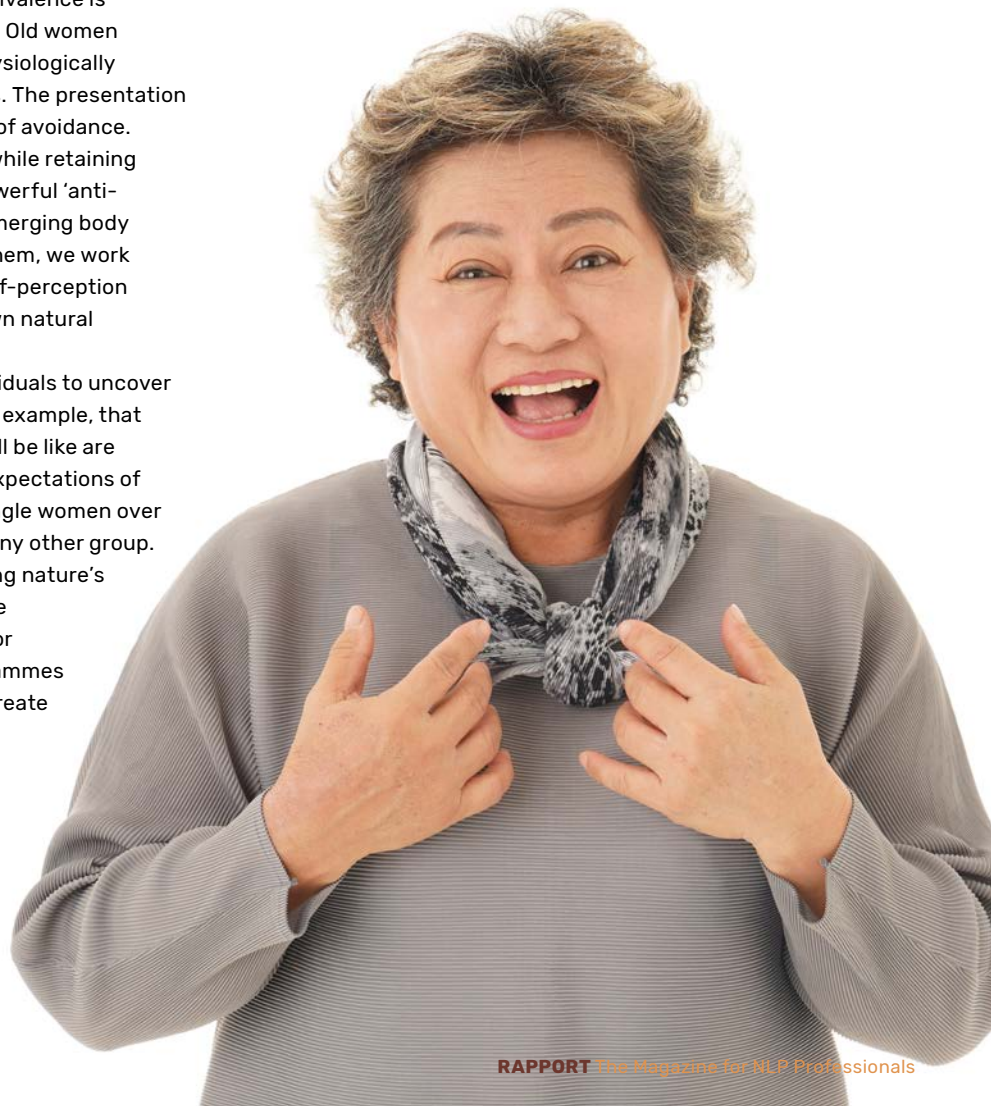
**The map is most definitely not the territory: a mindfully created map can emerge with flexibility and creativity.**

Within the myriad beliefs that surround the process of ageing, some of the most disabling for women are associated with guilt. It has long been my perception (prepare for a generalisation) that women take more responsibility for the care of others than men, often over and above their own needs. Such responsibility often generates guilt, both in terms of what they have or haven't done, and what it is now, in later stages of life, okay to do (Torstveit, Sütterlin and Lugob, 2016). Time to chip away at limiting beliefs. Meta Model presents naturally as an excellent tool, and I have enjoyed combining metaphor into the meditative practices to stimulate unconscious take up, to loosen the deep structures and beliefs around guilt. Many women who respond to the programme find the ability to shift guilt is liberating, recognising that guilt is dynamic rather than a 'thing': "Session Two was an epiphany for me, aged 77... shifting so many aspects of guilt and responsibility that I have carried my entire life."

### Framing and reframing

Frames-wise, I position the transition to old age as a psychosocial event, a predictable crisis of adult life, after Erickson (1958, 1963) and Sheehy (1995), entailing significant change and decision making. Neither intrinsically negative nor positive, crisis suggests a punctuation mark in the life narrative, an organic space to navigate. While Erickson saw old age as a time of assessment and wisdom, Sheehy proposes old age as a generative life stage, heralding a 'second adulthood', rather than a time of decline. The map is most definitely not the territory: a mindfully created map can emerge with flexibility and creativity.

While physical and mental health may change along the way, when we are mindful, we notice what we can do, develop new capabilities, or re-ignite lost or forgotten capabilities. We may



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▶ even be better than ever before at some things, for example effective decision-making. When you consider older age a generative life stage, what might you really dare to plan? The invitation to be daring, to live life with adventure, is a thread that weaves throughout my work, always within the valued outcomes of each individual.

In our now selves, it can be easy to be whimsical and to make social and personal comparisons that feel unresourceful: “I used to be able to,” or “My skin looks so much older.” Using anchoring and time travel, I invite women to propel themselves to a future date, sensory channels blazing, and look back at themselves now: what might you appreciate about your now self, which at some time will become your younger self? What would your older self say to you now? What do you need to listen to? Time travel is a wonderful tool to anchor powerful states, or collapse powerful states, creating acceptance of one’s self in the ‘now’, and forging future versions of that same self as valued, vital human beings.

And we can mentally travel through time to revisit the footfall of the past, to honour and rediscover the hidden gems of knowledge and experience that have maybe become buried within the hurly burly of living, uncovering long forgotten dreams and possibilities, filtering through older eyes and mixing into the cauldron to become our wisdom.

What of biological rhythms? Nature marks our reproductive function with a finality and inevitable certainty, which, within an ageist cultural context, can be challenging to accept. Menopause is a powerful end to reproductive capability, often concomitant with shifting domestic roles and decreased access to professional roles. Personal identity can feel precarious. Some women feel they are fading from view, their voices unheard, their value diminished, a sense of invisibility slipping under the skin. This can be coupled with social encouragement to minimise the physical signs of ageing.

It can be empowering to consider invisibility in a different way. What other meanings can we develop for ourselves during the change process to feel more powerful, to walk in our own boots of

confidence? Within my work, I encourage women to step into their own agency, to create their own meaning. If invisible, invisible to who? In which circumstances? Are there any means by which a degree of invisibility can be resourceful? When grounded in confidence, who might you want to be visible to, and why? And who and what might you want to stop paying attention to, what and who do you no longer want to attract? Through reframing at depth and becoming mindfully aware of who and what we really want in our lives, through anchoring confidence and courage, women can move mountains.

We all know language is powerful. On a fun fact note, in Portugal, where I live, there is no verb in the language for retire. The closest word is reformar – to reform. I find this a useful notion, that in re-formation lie many opportunities of how to shape the next stage, the structure of my internal and external environments.

## Conclusion

There is much more to be said, not all of it here. Involving myself in this area of work is a passion and a privilege. As we know, we are always neuro-linguistically programming. Meaning and equivalents lurk and surface in the trail we leave from the words we choose, our beliefs and repetitive thoughts carving our neurological pathways. It is so easy to fear ageing, yet equally, it is easily possible to embrace it. With some attention and intention, why not programme ourselves into a mindful older age, choosing our beliefs, perspectives and expectations, and living with compassion? It is a great gift to self to create one’s own internal space of infinite possibility, and in the Crone work, my intention is to support women to tap into that gift for themselves. Each moment is no longer or shorter than it ever was.

In co-authoring our older age, knowing that navigating any life stage will include change, loss, acceptance and openness, we can influence our quality of life, and put ourselves at cause.

We can even believe, as my old tarot reader used to say at my annual reading, that the best is yet to come. ■