



CONSCIOUS LIFE CHOICES

Change Your Choices, Change Your Life

Want to Change Your Life? Get to Know Your Metaphors by Using ‘Clean Language’

By Eleanor Haspel-Portner, Ph.D.

Your brain captures every experience you have. It shifts from short-term to long-term memory, processing and binding cognitive information accessed from various parts of its working memory. Then, it organizes all this information to form a single representation. In other words, your brain archives memories in the form of stories.

Because when you speak, your brain encodes information as stories, you are likely to archive your stories in the form of metaphors – comparing your experiences or feelings to things you know. You form a frame of reference from which you communicate. Thus, metaphors are primary components of story structure, including stories you reference about yourself.

The details of your life are captured in your metaphors.

You are a product of your metaphors. In fact, research has shown that people speaking English use up to six metaphors per minute. And, most people are generally unaware that they use metaphors in their daily language. Nevertheless, metaphors are the language of the mind – and they often reveal the unconscious depth of your soul.

Although traditional therapy and coaching techniques work with a person’s metaphors, these techniques often either miss-out on the richness of an individual’s story, or simply catches glimpses of the depth of the story’s metaphors in cursory ways.

A great deal has changed. During the 1980’s, New Zealand psychotherapist David Grove was responsible for the development of *Clean Language*. His work emerged from his work with trauma cases involving sexual abuse and war veterans. Grove developed incredibly effective “clean” techniques or tools that work directly with a client’s language and inner space.

Going deep in just 15 minutes.

Utilizing Clean Language focuses attention solely on the client’s internal perceptual relationships and their outcome. Penny Tompkins, along with fellow therapist and coach, James Lawley, expanded Grove’s Clean Language method documenting and recognizing its symbolic modeling components. Grove’s work opens up interesting ways to work with clients because of its power and simplicity. Even experienced patients and therapist are astounded at the transformational power of these systems.



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In my practice, I find that using “clean” tools deepen the client’s understanding of their issues moving them quickly into a state of deep mindfulness because of the way their imagery and language moves them into their inner world.

In a recent session with Jim P, who has had numerous therapy experiences over the past 15 years, the result was profound. The session began with one simple and non-probing question:

“When you’re working at your best, it’s like what?”

“It’s like silence with inner peace. You know, calm and secure.”

“And it’s like silence with inner peace, and calm and secure, and when peace, and calm and secure, is there anything else about peace, and calm and secure?”

Starting from this statement, I followed a clean line of questioning – reflecting Jim’s own words back to him with the most basic of the Clean Language questions. I reflected each statement Jim made back to him using his words exactly. This technique systematically deepened the exploration and detail for Jim of his inner landscape - he landed on a profound insight within just 15 minutes.

Jim recognized how he loses touch with himself and with the calm and secure place inside his soul that he so values when he depends and looks outside himself for approval. He then said, *“When I know that I matter, it’s safe for me to go into my soul.”*

We continued to explore this safe space in Jim’s soul. And when our short session ended Jim was excited by this new approach. “This was, by far, the best therapeutic experience I’ve ever had,” he said. “What would normally have taken *two-years* of digging around in my subconscious in traditional therapy, we accomplished in just 15 minutes!” Jim was significantly impacted by this short experience.

I have been in practice as a clinical psychologist since 1973. From my professional perspective, Clean Language and its derivative tools are unsurpassed in their power. Clean Language creates an immediate deepening of self-awareness, i.e., it has practical application as a tool akin to Tibetan mindfulness. In Jim’s words, *“It cuts through the B.S. very quickly.”* But, why is this method so effective?

It’s the client’s perceptions that count.

The idea behind Clean Language is to remove the therapist/coach’s influence and biases as much as possible from the process. This is the basis of the term “clean”. As a part of this questioning method, David Grove developed ways of working that use client/patient/coachee’s own words as the basis for further questioning – with none of the



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interviewer's metaphors, assumptions, or points-of-view infused into the dynamic. Grove discovered that the cleaner the questions, the more freedom clients had to use their own words as the basis of healing and change – rather than working through the therapist's interpretations of their metaphors, the client only relates to and utilizes their own perceptions. After all, it is only the client's metaphors that count.

Begin your exploration using 12 basic questions, to find out for yourself how as the coach/therapist you remove your own assumptions from the process. As the coach/therapist you still play an important role in your client's process. The fundamentals you focus on are pretty simple:

- Listen attentively to every word spoken;
- Hold back any opinions or advice;
- Ask Clean Language questions that develop and explore a person's metaphors.
- Listen to the answers, choosing key words in and from client's statements, and ask additional Clean Language questions based on what was said.
- Hold and develop a model of the client's inner landscape and use it referentially using the client's words to maintain their internal focus and its exploration.

All answers and insight in Clean Language emerge from the perspective and inner world of the client. Mastering 12 basic Clean Language questions add a potent tool for helping clients (or yourself) achieve results far quicker, and with as much, or more, depth as could be acquired in months or years of traditional therapy.

As another example, a client whom I've seen off and on for the past 20 years experienced an extraordinarily liberating insight during a "Clean" thera-coaching session. Since I had known her for so long, I could have easily told her what she needed to know.

My words resonated with my client because, in this instance, I primarily used the same words she used. She heard only her own words describe her inner space. The Clean Language method facilitated internal awareness. Thus, my client arrived at a place of knowing by using her own metaphors, her own words, and her own perceptions. She, like Jim, agreed that Clean Language is a powerful and effective technique.

It's not just for therapists.

As a therapist and coach since 1973, I have observed tremendous change in the mental health and personal growth field. Currently, many coaching practices engage the coach in therapy-like practices. While this is not a trend the coaching profession advocates – the coaching professional standards and ethics maintain that mental health issues need to be addressed by mental health professionals – the Clean Language approach enables coaches (trainers, managers, spouses, and parents) to improve the quality and clarity of their



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communication and understanding in a respectful and insightful way without the risk of potentially hurtful judgments or interpretations.

Clean Language is a tool that *anyone* can safely use.

Because I think it can be especially helpful for couples, I teach couples with whom I work to use it with each other. By learning to use Clean Language, these couples actually hear and feel heard by one another. Reactivity is reduced because the "listener" isn't forming his or her own opinions as a response. Instead, listening for key words used in asking a series of Clean Language questions, the "listener" helps their partner drill down into the heart of what their partner feels. Partners can take a 10-minute turn, assuring that both their needs are effectively communicated.

Clean Language can be used in a business context. Managers who have learned this technique can achieve crystalline clarity with their team members. Research demonstrates that the clearer the communication, the better the results and performance. And, it improves employee satisfaction and morale. Achieving perfect understanding eliminates doubt and ambiguity – two key factors that cause employees to leave.

And, of course, coaches who use Clean Language facilitate a depth of understanding for their clients in terms of how clients perceive themselves and how they see the world and their futures. Having these deep insights enables both coach and client to optimize and effectively hone their communication in unique client-driven metaphors. Because Clean Language tools significantly improve the speed at which answers come, business clients find it extremely attractive. In my experience, executives and other people serious about their business like to cut to the chase as quickly as possible. As the client begins to see results more quickly, the more relevant they perceive the process to be.

Clean Language clarifies and adds depth to one's experience.

One of the most impactful aspects of Clean Language is that it serves as a tool that can be used by individuals at any time. By learning how to use this tool, one can immediately use Clean Language to clarify and gain perspective in their present circumstances.

How you think – the stories you've created that define your life and the world around you – are significant. They drive your actions, flavor your responses, and have tremendous effect on the people around you.

Through Clean Language, you gain empowering understanding of your metaphors. When you understand your metaphors – especially when something isn't going the way you'd like – you then have control over your story and can make conscious choices about how to reframe or retell it. When you control your story, self-awareness, mindfulness, i.e.,



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clarity is achieved – this is an essential step in making conscious decisions that lead to a life of greater fulfillment and happiness.

That's the power of Clean Language.

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Links

- www.cleanlanguage.co.uk
- www.cleancoaching.com
- www.cleanforum.com
- www.powersofsix.com

About the Author

Eleanor Haspel-Portner, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist since 1973, is an expert in interdisciplinary practice. She prefers to partner with her clients using multidimensional skills that guide them toward self-awareness and thus, toward self-realization. She is a member of numerous professional organizations, including: the American Psychological Association, the Southern California Society for Clinical Hypnosis (Board Member & Faculty), Diplomate & Certified Relationship Specialist of the American Psychotherapy Association, Relationship Coaching Institute, International Coach Federation. Eleanor is an extensively published author. A wealth of information regarding Dr. Haspel-Portner's unique approach can be found at: <http://www.consciouslifechoices.com>, <http://www.dreleanorhaspel-portner.com>, and at <http://www.noblesciences.com>.

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