



PLANNING: SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

GUEST: LESLIE SINN, DVM, DACVB

Colleen Pelar: Hi, welcome back to UNLEASHED (at work & home). Today my guest is Dr. Leslie Sinn, a veterinary behaviorist who's had a lot of work experience with a variety of animals and many different work environments, and I wanted to talk to Leslie about the idea of setting yourself up for success because certainly working with dogs--well, working with all animals but dogs are my background--we really look at that piece of how can I set up this family for success? And we need to do that also for ourselves and for our own personal happiness, so welcome Leslie. Thanks so much for joining me today.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Oh, thanks for having me, Colleen. I appreciate your thinking of me and inviting me to join you.

Colleen Pelar: I was delighted that you were able to come. Let's just start on the animal end because that's usually a little bit easier. What are some of the things that you tell people to think about when they're trying to set their animal up for success whenever they're dealing with a behavior concern.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Great question. [00:01:00] So I think probably the thing that's hard for people to keep in mind or that's important for people to keep in mind is that it's a lot easier to prevent issues from happening. Or prevent problems from occurring rather than dealing with the aftermath or the chaos that occurs, you know, associated with the with the problem behavior, the difficulty, whatever that might be. And although it may take some forethought and take a little bit of organization, the payoff is huge. So just a classic example of a very common problem as you know, that people have all the time with dogs is the mayhem and chaos that occurs when visitors arrive at the front door. And it is true, you know, you have unexpected visitors come, you have things that aren't anticipated, but you know, honestly ninety, ninety-five percent of the time, you can plan. And if you plan in advance and do something like, [00:02:00] very simple, put your dog on leash or put your dog in the spare bedroom or put your dog in the backyard or I mean, there are all kinds of potential alternatives to avoid that that chaos situation. It just takes 30 seconds of pre-thought, and you can avoid a lot of trouble and trauma. And I think that basic principle applies not just to our dogs, but to ourselves as well. I mean there are ways of setting ourselves up for success, ways of setting our clients up for success, our businesses up for success, if we just pause a moment and just think about where we're trying to go, what we're trying to accomplish, and set ourselves up in the in the best situation possible. Recognizing that it's not always, you know, you can't control for all the variables. We'd like to. Goodness knows, I'd love to be able to

control variables. But you [00:03:00] can sure make a pretty good attempt at it and you can sure have success a large percentage of the time with that pre-planning.

Colleen Pelar: Absolutely. It's interesting how ... I'm gonna mess up the quote but basically like every plan is going to fall apart. It won't, it won't come out perfectly as designed but failing to plan just leads to chaos and craziness. So you need to plan and you have to recognize that you're gonna have to adapt on the fly, but your point about having a little bit of forethought having such a big payoff I think is one of the things that that falls apart when we're under stress. That we start thinking, "I don't have time to do that. I can't deal with that right now." And that's true in that exact moment, but if we don't make the time to try to figure out what is going to make this better moving forward, we stay in that perpetual stress period.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Right absolutely. So [00:04:00] speaking for myself, I found that I am a great planner and I have a tendency to schedule things on a regular basis for my clients. I map out time. I map out training programs. I map out all kinds of things. And it wasn't until relatively recently that I had that epiphany, which is that maybe one of the reasons why I struggle so hard for myself on various occasions is, you guessed it, I don't have that same kindness directed at myself, right? I don't make that same effort for myself. So, you know, the old saw of scheduling things that are important rings true and that may be things like scheduling time to read a book or scheduling time to go to the gym or scheduling time to have a conversation with a friend. I know for a lot of people [00:05:00] that feels very mechanical, but the fact of the matter is in today's hectic world if you don't plan there are many many things that can take up your time. Whether you want it to or not. Many of them unimportant. And when you stop and take a look at your day and you realize that you've spent seventy percent of your time doing stuff that you'd rather not or that you would prefer not to have to deal with and that you've left the important things by the wayside. Bad news, right? And that's the time when we need to pause and actually take a break and schedule that time and I found that to be hugely effective to me. It's still chaps me a little bit to have to do it. I admit it. But when I take the time to schedule, plan, and allocate time, it is extremely helpful. And one of my personal failures is that I always underestimate [00:06:00] how long things are going to take me.

Colleen Pelar: Me too! The planning fallacy.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: "Oh, I can whip that article out in the day" or I can, I don't know name it, you know and it always takes more time than I think to the point now where I've actually started tracking how much time some things take me so that I'm a little bit more realistic and don't impose false expectations on myself. Don't set myself up for failure. Right?

Colleen Pelar: Yeah. I've been starting to track the actual time too because I just keep thinking why am I always behind? Well, I'm always behind because I thought I could accomplish 182 things in one day and that's not realistic and yet it's tough. One of the points you were making about scheduling time to read a book or have a conversation with a friend rang true to me also with the fact that we [00:07:00] break those commitments to ourselves--even when we scheduled it--when were under stress. We're like, "I don't have time to do this."

So the restorative things, the things that make us feel better and fill us back up are the first things we jettison when we're feeling under the gun.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Yes common problem and a common fallacy because you end up tapping yourself dry. You reduce your ability to change on the fly; to regenerate, recover, recoup; and everyone pays for that in the long run. Not just yourself, but your significant others, your business partners, the people that you work with. Everyone ends up paying for that in the long run. So it's false economy. It really is it's this business of feeling selfish about taking time for yourself and planning for yourself that everyone and everything should come first. I liken it to the stewardesses on the on the airplane who always emphasize, [00:08:00] you know, putting your air mask on first because you can't help anybody else if you pass out in the meantime, and I think wow that's a perfect analogy for life right there. If you don't invest in yourself and maintain yourself do what you need to do in order to maintain balance and sanity, you're of no use to anyone else in the long run.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah, I think that's absolutely true and yet it's a lesson that's so hard for so many of us to learn. You know, I think, the vast majority of people struggle with that from time to time where we feel like you have to serve someone else. Someone's in need and I should be there, and it should, should should. You know, all the shoulds. It should be me. No one else can do it. I have to do it. And then we run ourselves dry and have all those relationships suffer as a result. Yeah. It's a real tough thing and it's a real toxic thing in a work environment because, well, first off we're less [00:09:00] creative when we're stressed and we're less efficient when we're stressed. So we wind up just sort of doing things the way we're doing them and kind of bleeding off a little bit of negative energy with all that but we're slower and more stuck in our ways and more likely to ruffle other people's feathers too in those equations.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Very goal-oriented at that point, right, not whatever is going on in the periphery. What good or bad that might be happening.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah, the benefits of negative emotions narrowing and focusing your attention. Goal, goal, goal. There are some other goals that are getting crumpled in the meantime that we're not looking at that one.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Right and the fact that what you know vast majority of us spend what 80% of our time or more in the work location? Okay, if your work life is not happy um, it's going to have a proportionally adverse effect on your life in general.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah, and the current statistics on employee engagement are just really [00:10:00] shocking in terms of number of people who are not actively happily engaged at work. It's something like 70% of people are either just kind of phoning it in or even adversely working against, you know, like, "You say we're going to do this. Well, I'm not doing that." Seventy percent, that's horrifying. That means, you know, 30% of people are showing up and going, "Yay, team, let's go," and pulling everyone along with them. That's not good for any of us.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: No, absolutely. Yeah, I hear you. I hear you. It's interesting that you know a process that it has been embraced for so many years in the animal training community that is known to be scientifically valid and held as gospel, somehow or other hasn't filtered into our day-to-day lives. And that's the basic what we call ABC's, right? Antecedent, [00:11:00] behavior, consequences, which goes to your initial question about setting yourself up for success. Those would be the antecedents, and so we know this is not rocket science. We know that this is crucial, important, necessary in order to get a long-term behavioral change to get to our goals. And yet it's easy to apply it to our dog training but somehow how we don't apply it to our lives. It just really boggles boggles the mind in that regard. There are some great books out. There some great resources out there about ABC type training. It's basically Applied Behavior Analysis. But it's also been applied in other areas. For example, I just finished reading a great book that's called Nudge. I don't know if you've read it or not, a behavioral economics book about how we make decisions and how in most [00:12:00] situations it's by default. Um, and that whole aspect of how we interact with our environment as fascinating to me because it's been in the news day to day, right? How we all accept default settings for Facebook and for Google and for Amazon and how those default settings were giving away huge chunks of our personal information and lives and what we do. Because that's how we make decisions and we can't be bothered to do more. It's just mesmerizing.

Colleen Pelar: It really, isn't it? How much of our daily lives is just sort of rote or just someone else has made a decision for us and we go, "Well, that's the way it is." And we do what we did yesterday and we're not thinking about it. It's kind of stunning but from a brain aspect it makes total sense. It gives your brain the focus on what's new or novel or different and we're just sort of [00:13:00] like running all the other systems in the background. But that only works if you're happy with your results. If you're unhappy with what's going on and you just keep doing the same things because that's how we're wired, then that's really to our detriment.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Right, although it does get back to your additional your initial thought or some of what we've discussed already, which is that, you know, it's not always easy to break out of those default behaviors or those default patterns. It really does require to be you to be mindful to some extent and be aware of how you're making decisions. And let's face it, it takes some introspection and some self-evaluation and criticism and the decision that you want to make a change, that you want to have an impact. But that being said if you can do a self-assessment and decide where it is that you want to start to initiate some change you can have a powerful [00:14:00] effect with relatively minor tweaks if you take the time to do that.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah, there's amazing power in tiny tweaks, isn't there? Keystone effects. Um, can you give an example of one that you can think of from a human perspective?

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Yeah, so I as you know ended up studying for my veterinary board examination. It's been two-three years ago, and I'm not a spring chicken anymore. I stopped to think about how I was going to make sure that I was going to be successful in taking the exam. I obviously I can't do all night bingers anymore. That's not gonna cut it and the sheer volume of the information and having to get through it was overwhelming. And to back that up even

more [00:15:00] let's just say I because I'm not a spring chicken, because I knew that the clock's ticking, I only wanted to do this once. I mean wanted to be sure that I took that exam, that I passed the exam, and I didn't have time to be ditzing around. So I thought to myself, "Well, I'll just make sure that I study a couple hours a day." Well it became very evident very quickly that that was not working. So I mean how hard is it to take an hour and open up a book and study? Well apparently very hard because as we all know other things invade, right? Other things intrude. There's always a phone call to be made. There's always the client to be called back. There's always the crisis, usually not of your creation, but it's a crisis nonetheless. It has to be dealt with. You know on and on and on and on. And I found myself always putting it on the back burner and that's not going to work. It wasn't gonna work. No way, no how. So it's [00:16:00] like how can I set myself up to make sure that that this is going to work and the answer ended up being that I had to do some changes. Doesn't sound like major changes, but they were in the sense that I had to change my pattern of living. So what I ended up doing is going to bed a half an hour early right and getting up at 6 a.m. Every morning come hell or high water. I did not touch my phone. I did not open my computer. I sat down and I did my hour and half of study time. And I told all my family members, "You are not to talk to me. You're not to bother me." Thankfully at that hour of the morning most the time people weren't up anyway, and that's what I did and it was it was very very successful. In fact, it was so successful and I was so productive that here I am three years later and I do the same thing. I kept that pattern [00:17:00] because I found that I actually enjoyed having a period of time when I could sit down and concentrate on things and not get yanked hither and yon. That worked really really well. It wasn't that hard to do but it did take some foresight and pre-planning. I was a little appalled that I wasn't able to somehow or other fit the studying and otherwise during the course of the day. It just doesn't seem like it should have been that hard but it quickly became obvious that it wasn't going to happen the way I was doing it.

Colleen Pelar: It does get hard to fit it in, you know, even with the best of intentions. It's really hard. So carving out of special time for it and then really committing to that time. That nothing is interrupting this time. Don't interrupt me, and I'm not allowing myself to interrupt myself. No phone. No nothing.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Yeah because I just I felt you know, if I check the phone and there's a message. Oh, well, you know, maybe I better answer [00:18:00] that.

Colleen Pelar: You just get like yanked and you put your hooked and gone before you even realize that that happened with some of these things. Which does make it harder to make to carve out quiet time in the middle of everyone else's waking hours. So the beginnings of the days and the end of the days and my end of the day is not nearly as smart as my beginning of the day, so if I were studying for an exam, I also would need to do it first thing in the morning rather than last thing at night. But having this time where there are fewer people likely to need something from you can really help. I think it's really cool that you've kept that time. That it's provided you of value beyond the exam.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Yes. Yeah. It was a surprise to me. What kind of also prompted me to do that was the acknowledgement that in the evening I wasn't really doing anything that

was a benefit to me. A lot of times I would sit and, let's admit it, watch TV or [00:19:00] cruise through, I don't know, whatever internet links happen to be come tumbling in. I don't really enjoy that. That's embarrassing to say that but that's what you do. It's almost like a default behavior.

Colleen Pelar: It's like a numbing behavior. It's like, "I'm too tired to do something else, so I'll do this."

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: And so of all the incredible time waste or time dump. I mean like I said, embarrassingly. I really should be getting more sleep. There other ways to be more productive and I found that I haven't missed that at all, but it was a bit of a jaw dropper to realize that that's where my very precious time was going.

Colleen Pelar: Well that goes back to what you said before about a little bit of self-knowledge and really reflecting on your own behavior and seeing what am I doing? Like let's figure out what's actually happening. And then what do I wish was happening? And how do I get from [00:20:00] here to there? You know just like any other behavior mod plan. Uh, what is the reality and where do I want to be? You mentioned mindfulness earlier. Do you have any sort of meditation practice or do you just have sort of a mindful aspect to yourself?

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Actually, I do do meditation and you're going to laugh. I again, self-revealing information here, but you know it read all these self-help books and you know, you should be doing X and you should be doing why and none of that ever worked for me. Um, what always has been very relaxing for me honestly is a nice long shower or nice long stint in the bathtub. And I am very bad at verbalized mindfulness exercises. For some reason I can't get into those and I always find myself feeling bored and or giggling. And it just doesn't [00:21:00] work. Images are very powerful for me and I really really enjoy nature. I really enjoy animals, otherwise, obviously I wouldn't be in the profession that I'm in. And so I have a series of images that I run through my head in a sequence that I just work through every night. And I find it to be very relaxing and very soothing. And this is another habit that I picked up as I was studying for the exam and I felt the stress starting to ratchet up some more. I found it to be very very effective. So, pick an image that means something to you like flowing water or Great Falls during the flood. Water tumbling over the rocks and think of an appropriate key word that goes with that. Looking at the image and thinking to [00:22:00] yourself, "I am very powerful" or "I am solid" or "I am focused." Whatever the image is. So I found that to be very helpful. Images of my animals and of my family and friends to remind me of what's important and that helps to ground me so much when things are rough or when you when things could be better, right? On days when it's not rough, it's very soothing and, I don't know, satisfying right? It gives you a sense of wellness or wholeness when you feel yourself surrounded by those images.

Colleen Pelar: Yes. Yeah. I think that's beautiful. I've heard of some imagery based meditation, but not this concept of having a particular image and a series of them that you would go through and have a message associated with each item. I love that [00:23:00] and I think it also harkens back to a point you and I discussed before we started this of that not

everything works for everyone. We all have to figure out what is going to work for us. And so, you know, someone says to you meditate and you start listening to the words and you're like, "This is ridiculous. This isn't doing it for me." That's completely valid but the benefits of meditation have come to you because you kept looking for the way that works for you.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Right, for what fits.

Colleen Pelar: I love that. I think that's really cool.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Recently I came across a very interesting book that talked about walking meditation as well. And I don't know if you have had a chance to read some of that research but it's not a new concept. I mean the whole idea of the mazes and Christian churches and working your way closer to God as you work your way through the maze, walking meditation, right? [00:24:00] So for many people the meditation is hard because you have to sit still with your thoughts. Your body may you may be in pain. As we all get older some of us have more pain than others but walking meditation is another place I think that, whether people realize it or not, especially in the dog Community right when they go out walk their dogs, whether that's what they call it or not, in effect the relief that they get and sharing time with their four-legged companions is in effect walking meditation.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah, and I think we undervalue, how much movement makes us mentally feel better. Like we just think like, "I should be able to sit at a desk and do my computer work and life is good," but our bodies were really designed to move. We feel better when we move. I've had pinched nerve for a couple of weeks now and it's been bad. I hadn't been able to walk my dog for a few weeks. I haven't been [00:25:00] able to think about much of anything for a few weeks. It was lovely to get back out with my dog and just go for a walk. We couldn't go as far but he was happy and I was happy, and wow, it made a difference.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Yep. It's pretty precious time together for sure.

Colleen Pelar: It is, it is. I think I think sometimes we think we're doing it for the dog and yet it's so often has as much benefit for us, right? It's like, "Here I'll do this for you," and like, "Oh, I feel better. I feel better." Yeah, I think that's a real good point. That all fits into that whole setting ourselves up for success. Really looking at the behavior that exists and the behavior that we want and trying to find the path in between. So when we're dealing with relationships with other people, if we're finding ourselves in situations where we're having a little bit more friction than we'd like to have, what are some ideas that you might have that could help somebody take one step [00:26:00] toward the happier goal?

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Well, for what it's worth, one of the things that I've discovered is that as a general rule, believe it or not, most people are not deliberately trying to make your life difficult. It may feel like it and on certain days, it sure seems like it, but as a general rule people are not trying to make your life difficult. There's something else going on or they're distracted and because of that they may not even realize--as scary as that is--they may not even realize the impact that they're having on you. So I try and practice what I preach. I try

and recommend people not to open your mouth until you're at a place where you can say things without emotion. You've had a chance to think about it a little bit and always ask yourself, "What are you trying to get out of this?" If you're going to have an interaction [00:27:00] with somebody, are you just going to yell because it makes you feel better? What do you want them to do differently? Because simply expressing disdain or contempt or anger, all those negative emotions, nothing's going to change. So you need to take a step back. Take a deep breath and decide what you want out of the interaction, and try as best you're able to communicate what problem it is that you're having and what kind of a different outcome you would like when you approach someone with a concern. That is the best, the best that I can recommend. It's not always easy, especially in emotion-charged working environments or in situations where people are running at full bore. You know, they may or may not be sleep-deprived. [00:28:00] It's difficult. But if you just try and remember that no one's out to get you and that other folks have as many issues or more than you do and show a little bit of compassion and empathy. People respond very well to that as compared to the angry off-the-cuff comment.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah. It's very true how often--I think partially because our brains are pattern-making machines--that we ascribe motives to people's behavior. "I know you're doing this because ..." And so often they're not even they're not even aware. So never ascribe to malice, you know, ...

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: That's why dogs are so educational, right? That really opens up your eyes because so many people try and describe motives to their dogs. Standard line for clients, you know, I don't think that dogs are trying to take over the world. I really don't think they're trying to make it into the White House. I don't think world domination is [00:29:00] where they're where they're going with this and obviously said with some humor. But the fact of the matter is that when you start looking at things a little bit more objectively, often you'll find that there are many other explanations for a particular behavior other than somebody's out to get you. Consequently that allows you to be a little bit more compassionate than your response and to work towards common goals and common resolution as compared to one-upsmanship or who gets to win. It's not a slap down.

Colleen Pelar: No, that always escalates things instead of defuses them. So it really does come down again to having a little bit of forethought and planning for things and looking at how can we prevent problems from happening? Some problems you can't prevent, you know other people doing something, you may or may not be able to change something about that in future, but the way that we respond is within our control.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Yes, it is a choice.

Colleen Pelar: When we're careful and [00:30:00] observant and not just happening on our defaults.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Which if you've been getting doing your mindfulness will put you in a better place.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah. It is interesting. I had an experience a couple of weeks ago where I had stayed overnight in the hospital with my aunt who had had surgery. So like no sleep for me. I was awake all night and I had somewhere I had to be at 8:30 in the morning. So someone came to the hospital take over so I could go and I go out to the parking lot of the hospital and my car has a flat tire and I thought, "Well, that's frustrating," and I thought, "Oh my goodness, meditation works." Because a couple of years ago, I would have been sobbing and kicking my car. I would have been like "I have to go!" And I was just like, "Well that's a bummer. Now what am I gonna do?" And it was also placid. I was just like, "Well, here we are. I'm gonna have to deal with this [00:31:00] now." It was really funny because of this whole part of my brain going, "Oh my goodness, meditation it really has paid off for me. I'm not a raging lunatic in the parking lot that people are pointing at."

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: But that is the payoff, right? I mean that really is a payoff. Because it wouldn't have done you any good to scream or yell or kick or get upset. And it doesn't even make you feel better, right? That's the icing on the cake. I mean you can talk about letting it all out, but the research is pretty profound that having these explosions is not helpful, health-wise or otherwise, so kudos to you for getting to a point where you can step back and go, "Wow, there it is." And then to notice that you said, "Wow, there it is" instead of to trying to rip the tire off with your bare teeth.

Colleen Pelar: Yep, a little bit of a meta moment.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Very good. [00:32:00] Cool.

Colleen Pelar: We can set ourselves up for success, but things are going to go wrong. And then, then what? That's the piece we always need to be looking at. Things are going to go wrong. Then what? And the more we think about what we do and how we're choosing our behavior, the better it comes out in the long run.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Yeah, and you know that's a goal for all of us. It's a goal not only for the animals that we work with but also goal for ourselves. I see it as is behavioral flexibility. I think that's the best way to label it. That somehow or other you've got a little bit of elasticity or a little bit of plasticity, whatever you want to call it, a wiggle room such that when you're hit with these different bumps and goodness knows on any given day that are may be more than less, that you can switch to plan B and then to plan C and then to plan D and move on down the line as compared to viewing it as an assault of nature against yourself or [00:33:00] that again, like somebody's out to get you or that nobody loves you. I mean the whole downhill talk that ends up happening when things spiral out of control. So it's something that we should all strive for and aim for, which is that behavioral flexibility and that willingness to adapt and adjust as needed.

Colleen Pelar: This has been awesome. You've had lots to share. I really appreciate it. One of my favorite questions that I like to ask people, because I find it very interesting, is if your dog could speak English how would he describe you? So what would Possum say about you?

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: Oh my gosh, that is a very interesting question and a hard one, you know because he's a border collie. I've always kind of felt like it's the IQ of a four-year-old trapped inside of a furry body. But in general I would hope that he would say that we have a pretty [00:34:00] good time of it overall. We've tried to adjust our lifestyle to make him a part of the family and consider him to be a definitely a member of the family. He goes just about everywhere with us and I would hope that he would say that I'm a fun bud to hang out with.

Colleen Pelar: Well, that's great and all that fits in really well with setting up for success because you have made him a part of your family, which is setting it up for success. Wonderful. So if listeners would like to learn more about you and your work, how could they reach you?

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: The best way is through my website and it is behaviorsolutions.guru. Behavior solutions, plural. And that that website has a lot of information on it both of how to contact me and frequently asked questions and links and [00:35:00] all kinds of fun stuff.

Colleen Pelar: Great will have links in the show notes to that. Well, I really appreciate you taking time to talk to me today on UNLEASHED. It was so much fun talking with you.

Leslie Sinn, DVM, DACVB: I enjoyed it very much. Thanks for having me.

Colleen Pelar: If you found value in this, I hope that you will tell a friend because we're all really looking to try to find ways to make our lives easier and certainly Dr. Sinn has shared a lot of ways that she's worked to make her own life and the lives of her clients easier. So, please tell a friend and have them listen in to UNLEASHED (at work & home).