



BOLD LEARNERS: COMMITTING TO GROWTH

GUEST: SUSAN G. FRIEDMAN, PHD

Colleen Pelar: [00:00:00] Hi, welcome back to UNLEASHED (at work & home). My guest today is Dr. Susan Friedman who's a psychology professor at Utah State University, which coincidentally is where my son's girlfriend graduated, but I didn't make that connection until after Dominique graduated. Anyway, I've invited Dr. Friedman to come on and talk to us today about being a bold learner because I recently saw her give a presentation where she used that phrase many times. Be a bold learner; commit; try it; put something down on paper. That really resonated with me. So, welcome Dr. Friedman. I'm so glad you could join me today.

Susan Friedman: Oh, thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Colleen Pelar: So, you did use that phrase repeatedly. What about that phrase resonates with you?

Susan Friedman: Yeah, I remember the context in which I used it during my presentation was to hopefully set the occasion for the audience to be very bold in asking questions [00:01:00] because they didn't have a strong history with me from past interactions, and we were only going to be together for a short amount of time, and I wanted them to be confident in getting every single thing from me they wish to get. And I realized in the quiet of the room that they might need some extra prompts and ways to make them comfortable. So, I reminded them that they can be bold learners, and by that what I meant was seize the moment of us being together to the fullest degree. Ask questions. Give me comments that I can respond to so that they leave the seminar with no regrets of what they should have asked, or wish they'd known that I could have helped them with. So, that was the context in which we were using it. I wanted them to use their behavioral repertoire; hand-raising, interrupting, [00:02:00] vocalizing, facial expressions of confusion to the fullest so that when we left one another, they had everything that I had to offer, and I would be able to get more from them.

Colleen Pelar: I think that's genius because so often you see a presenter lecturing and then you might get something like, you know, "Anyone got any questions?" or "Did y'all get that?" And those kinds of questions put someone in a position of feeling like, "Oh, everyone else got it, but not me. And maybe I'll look foolish if I ask a question or need clarification or say, but what about...", whereas by you setting it up, "I expect you have questions. Of course, you have questions. What are your questions? Share them," that was wonderful. I loved that.

Susan Friedman: Well, I'm really glad. One of the things that I often say to audiences and I know I said it then when we were together to is – we are so reinforced for being knowers for already having [00:03:00] information and already having skills and competence that we forget or we're unfamiliar with the idea that mistakes and questions are necessary to building that knowledge, those skills, and that competence. So, somehow, we have to learn to better love mistakes in order to again be bold learners that is to ring out everything there is to learn from every experience for improving what we do in the future.

Colleen Pelar: And that of course is so resonant to Carol Dweck's work on mindset with the fixed versus growth mindset where if you have this idea in your head of you know, I am smart or I am good at this or I am not good at that, you're hesitant to step out of that box because your brain has created this box around it. And we do get ourselves sort of stuck into these patterns of "I don't really know", and I find for myself because again [00:04:00] I said, this was something that really resonated with me, I have inhibited a lot of behavior when I'm in a situation where somebody wants an answer and I think there is one right and true answer and that's the one they want, and so, I'm hesitant to do it wrong, even silently to myself on paper. So, you know one point you said, okay now write down your thoughts about this and I now can do that because I finally learned you can commit to a piece of paper. But for years I wouldn't have. For years, I would have just waited quietly during that time and other people would have written stuff down, but I wouldn't have wanted to commit wrongly because that would have made me uncomfortable; but there's a right answer and I don't know it, and this is awkward and terrible, and I think that's so limiting for us. It's very, very limited.

Susan Friedman: It is. Very limiting, and it's a beautiful insight; a beautiful growth that you've been able to accomplish. What may seem like a small step to people who do it easily, but it's really a [00:05:00] huge step for people who have learned that the only interaction you should offer are ones that you're a hundred percent confident are the correct interaction.

Colleen Pelar: Right.

Susan Friedman: And that is very, very limiting is a great word for it. People will often talk about that style of inhibited or shy patterns of behavior as inside the organism, inside people as though it's you were born with it and it is immutable. It can't change like eye color. And I think we now have a pretty good handle on how genes and brains and personality tendencies are flexible; everything on the planet including those correlates to behavior are flexible. So, even if you're born with tendency, the pattern in general of being shy or quiet that [00:06:00] is withholding information, unless you're a hundred percent sure it's correct. And even then, you might withhold it in a room of strangers because you project what their expectation of you might be. We now know that it's also very much not only flexible, but also, another correlate that's greatly underestimated in our culture is the influence of the environment on that pattern. So, as a behavior analyst that's what I focus on the most and I would assume with good confidence that in addition to a shy personality style or tendency that you may have been born with you were also reinforced for

withholding information unless you were correct, and not reinforced for taking the leap that even if it's not correct, your information has value in the pool, the common pool of information between us. So, it's [00:07:00] great to think about how the environment influences that because, of course we're not changing the organism we're not changing your genes or brain directly, but we have enormous power to change the environment, to change the signals that say, "Take that risk, and write that down", and to control the reinforcers for doing it. I tell my students all the time. I just started one of my online classes and it was in my opening – my opening welcome was that you want to reinforce each other and your clients not for being correct initially, but for participating at all. So, you may have noticed when you were observing my teaching style that I was selecting for hand-raising; that is praising hand-raising, hoping my praise or my nodding eye [00:08:00] contact and other reinforcers I could make available to my students. I was reinforcing for raising hands, for speaking up, for saying something, and didn't reinforce correctness until way towards the end of the day when I had already built that relationship hopefully with many of the students. So, those are some of the ways we increase more communication. You know our clients and students...

Colleen Pelar: And from a dog trainer perspective, that's something that I have talked to families about forever. You know, that we want to help the dog be willing to do something; to make a mistake, to experiment, to explore because more punitive training was all about suppressing behavior. It doesn't really teach the dog and we want the dog to be comfortable expressing it. I can totally see when a dog has had prior history with more suppressive techniques because "I [00:09:00] don't want to make the mistake." They don't want it. They're like me not wanting to write on the paper. They're like, "I'll just stand here doing nothing because doing nothing is better than doing it wrong!"

Susan Friedman: That's right. And if we don't put behavior out then consequences can't select with reinforcers to build the right behaviors. So, it starts this this spiral or downward kind of loop where if I don't behave, I don't get feedback. And by feedback from the environment, it could be naturally occurring feedback like how to put my hand to best lock a door, or it can be feedback from a friend or a teacher. So, we have to have a lot of behavior in order for reinforcers to select for the most effective behaviors or the most efficient behaviors. And you hear dog trainers and other kinds of animal trainers say the best animals to work with are those that have a lot of behavior and it's true for humans as well. If a human [00:10:00] is suppressing their behavioral possibilities, we can't select with reinforcers for better behavior. Yeah, really nicely described on your part.

Colleen Pelar: I think it's a very interesting element for us to explore from the perspective of resilience and how we deal with stress. Because so often stress and particularly meaning veterinarians if we're just going to stereotype are high achievers who've made it through school getting really good grades and having the answers, and then off we go to the work environment where life gets messy and it's not always easy to have the one right and true answer. So, from this perspective of being a bold learner, what are some of the benefits that you could see for developing this later in life, like if you weren't a bold learner before why should you become one now?

Susan Friedman: Yeah. Well and I think that we've already hit on [00:11:00] some of that. In the questions and descriptions you gave, and some of my responses, the idea that if you aren't a bold learner defined as someone who is withholding information, then reinforcers can't build your contribution. Why it's important to have... that leads us to ask then why is it important to contribute? You know, if you're not a bold person withholding information, we can't reinforce the style of interacting where you give a lot of information and you're not contributing. And so, we ask why is it important to contribute and I just I think of that idea in that that mean, or that phrase 'all of us is smarter than one of us'. So, when the reinforcers are following contributions saying anything that makes it more likely that we're going to hit on rich solutions or [00:12:00] insights. I mean, you will never know how you contribute to my life unless you contribute. So, if you're quiet I get a zero possibility of gain. If you take the risk in putting information into that pool, my probability goes up and up and up of you influencing my life and isn't that what it's really all about? I mean those... that's what we call friendship, collegueship, mentorship is the ability to co-influence one another.

You know, my background is in science. And so, my worldview is not about reaching for the breakthrough. Or the unique, autonomous insight. I've been taught that everything I do is the result of standing on the shoulders of the scientists who came before me. And so, that's kind of how I guess you'd given me the insight through your question. [00:13:00] That's how I view my contribution as well is that my contribution isn't really about Susan in any autonomous way, but I'm the messenger of every influence I've had up to this very moment, including your insightful questions. When you don't risk putting information into that common pool, then your influence on me is minimized, and who would I be without the co-influence of the people around me? I mean I shudder to think of what I wouldn't know and what I could not contribute if you took away from me, like if you reduced me; if you deleted out every part of my knowledge and skills that were due to other people.

There would be nothing, right? It's sort of like, you know that the new finding that there are more cells that make us up that are not human than our or something really bizarre like [00:14:00] that. We have more... I'll look it up. There's something crazy I heard on NPR that there's more non-human cells on us like the mites on our eyelashes and eyebrows. We'll check out but what I'm referring to but again, you know, if you took away all the things were not, there would be nothing that we are. Yeah, so that's why it's important for you to be a bold learner. It's not only about what you gain by allowing reinforcers to select for your contribution, but it's about how what you contribute give me; it's a reinforcer for me and adds to my knowledge. So, we have a responsibility to contribute for the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. But I understand that it's hard when that's not your style and there were many times where you know, we talk about style as though it's a... again a fixed [00:15:00] thing but a shy person is not shy 24/7. And a bold person is not bold 24/7. I think people would characterize me as bold but that is conditional like all behavior. There are conditions in which I'm very shy; put me in the middle of a party and I will find the corner faster

Colleen Pelar: And you'll find me there.

Susan Friedman: Oh my God, I'll be so thankful because then you and I can do one-to-one socializing which I'm more comfortable with. And then a shy person is not shy 24/7. When they're at their own dinner table, they might be more loquacious or bold, right? So, that's another important point. When we label you, we are restricting your full range of behavior. Better to resist labeling you as shy and reinforce the moments of bold. And better to not label me as bold [00:16:00] and then be disappointed when I refused the invite to your beautiful party because I surely will get the flu if I can avoid it. Yeah.

Colleen Pelar: So, if you have a workplace where you are not the supervisor so, you don't have control of everything, you just have control of you, what strategies would you suggest for a person to become a bolder learner in an environment where that hasn't always been encouraged?

Susan Friedman: Great question. First, I would say that the supervisor doesn't have control with everything either. The supervisor only has control of the supervisor and then we by consent, whether it's coercion, or free choice, you know truly preference, we consent to the control that the supervisor has but we could save that for another podcast.

Colleen Pelar: ...or perhaps the next question. We'll see.

Susan Friedman: Yeah. Yeah [00:17:00]. The question about what can you do to develop the behaviors and skills you wish to see is first of all to describe in observable behaviors what that label means to you. So, if you say, "I don't want to be shy anymore", then the first question we always ask in a good behavior analysis and a good design of an intervention is what do you want to do? So, we're going to move that you don't want to be shy anymore to the side. We're going to say what do you want to do? And if you say I want to be bolder then my next question is what does bolder look like? Or Teresa McEwen gave me a new prompt by bold. By that I mean, so, what does it look like and by that, I mean our two great prompts to start the momentum on the path of [00:18:00] a great behavior analysis, which is the analysis of the behavior in the conditions in the context we're talking about, and then great building of an intervention design. And so, you might want to write down the different contexts or conditions; the different environments in which you want to be bolder and what that looks like behaviorally.

So, for example, I have a student now who has carried the label shy all her life in my class. And she's listening on the phone, and then after I do my lecture, I turn everybody's phone mutes off, so we can talk to each other and her goal was to ask a question during this public, open phone forum. And she did it beautifully the first week of class and now we're on week two. So, once she feels that you can ask questions in that condition [00:19:00] in that forum, without hesitation might be our criteria, that might include with a calm heart rate in the private of that set she can report on without that hesitation then maybe we'll raise the criteria. From there, maybe it'll be asking two questions or maybe it'll be asking a question of another student and not me. And then once that's without hesitation, she can decide on what is the next most likely to succeed condition. But that is a little harder. and then go from there

Yeah, and we can build our program in that way. So, the key points in changing anyone's behavior is to remove the label. No longer ask what don't you want – ask what you do want and then describe the conditions in which you want it because changing conditions changes behavior. Pick the easiest condition to [00:20:00] succeed, and then operationalize... that is describe in observable terms what that behavior looks like. What does bold look like in the condition of open mic during my online class, and then you have to also ask what will the reinforcers be. For adult human behavior and children's behavior often too, the success of meeting a goal is often enough, but it may not be and so you might ask yourself is putting data on the wall a reinforcer? Seeing your number of questions in the class conditions grow exciting to you? There is research that suggests just watching the data improve is a reinforcer. Or might you say when I ask one question, and class is over, I'm going to go get myself a latte from my favorite coffee shop where I'm going [00:21:00] to email Susan to say I did it. So, it isn't always tangible reinforcers, but you need to have a clear idea of what are those behavior strengthening outcomes going to be because behavior has a purpose. That's what it's evolved to do – serve a function. We always have to track – what is the function of these new behaviors? If we expect to strengthen them and maintain them.

Colleen Pelar: Yes, and I think the idea that all behavior has a function is something that a lot of people don't think about. So, this is occurring and I'm finding it annoying. Well, okay, let's talk about that behavior. Why do you think that behavior is occurring? And we can explore why you think it's annoying also, but let's just talk about why this is occurring because it's serving a purpose for the individual doing it. And to look at things from that angle really opens up insight because we [00:22:00] start changing point of view, because we're so prone to making a story. You are tapping your fingers on the table to drive me crazy because you're a jerk, or you're tapping your fingers on the table because you're nervous that you have an appointment this afternoon. And you're just wondering what how it's going to go. Those are totally different things, but the behavior is fingers on table and making up all sorts of garbage about it. But if we can start looking at, well what is the function of this behavior? Why is it occurring? And what is the benefit that the person or animal doing it is getting out of doing this. It's fascinating to see sometimes people are just automatically less bothered by the behavior when they can create a different story for it. And then, if they still want to change the behavior, we're at least starting from a more open spot, less judgmental, less, you know, "Arg; you are so annoying" behavior.

Susan Friedman: Yeah, you [00:23:00] bring up so many good points and you even use how many of the same language that I use to describe it which is fun and interesting to hear how similar we describe those things. The stories that we tell. You know, we observe something; we might even observe the behavior and environment can, you know, relation together and then how we account for it is the point of debate, right? So, if you're an ethologist, someone who studies wild behavior of herds of animals, you might account for behavior one way, or if you're a veterinarian you may account for behavior with the physiological or structural stuff. But when you're a behavior analyst, or a trainer, or a teacher, the account you use, the story you use to understand behavior can be devastating to your student success or really augmenting of your student success [00:24:00]. Our culture has not taught us that behavior has function in the real world. We talk about

behavior as inside the animal or the human. And serving only internal benefits. You do it for yourself. But a science understanding of behavior is much more empowering to behavioral change effort. And that is... I behave in a way that changes the environment that is of benefit to me in some way. And if I can track what that behavior and environmental outcome is, I can understand why I'm doing it. Which already makes me a softer person; a more compassionate person, and I can also change the environmental outcomes to change my behavior. So, you're really opening a lot of doors with those descriptions that you gave [00:25:00] and again, this is true for all animals whether it's a fly, or a seal, or a child, or an adult human. All behavior is evolved to have a purpose to change the environment in ways that have value for the behaving organism. That alone is very empowering.

So, the person drumming the table might be drumming the table because they're trying to distract and annoy you were to get the attention in the room, or they might be drumming the table because it dissipates some of that negative energy and arousal they have from you know, what we would call being nervous or upset. What a different those accounts make and how we respond to the person. And then we might be able to say, "Here's a row of beads, right? You could put in your lap and they're quiet..." Or, verbally expressing your [00:26:00] nervousness can also be very helpful. I mean, it opens the world to ways of helping, that labeling the person is a jerk which, you know, we've been taught to do. It doesn't allow us to have that same level of help or compassion.

Colleen Pelar: Right, which I think is a real valuable piece for our interpersonal relations, especially at work. When we start finding ourselves in these ruts with certain people, you know, there's those people get along with and people we don't get along with quite so well and people get along with and the ones we don't. And often some of the stories in our heads, not so much the actual behavior. And so, if we can run stop and think about that, that can help us redirect a little bit of that.

Susan Friedman: Absolutely. There's a book that I recommend often if that's okay. [Crucial Conversations](#).

Colleen Pelar: Yes. That is a very good one. I will be sure to put a link to that one in.

Susan Friedman: Yeah, and that one [00:27:00] describes with great graphics, simple great graphics that you have the facts of the drumming fingers during a meeting, or before an appointment, and then you have the emotion of annoyance. And if we track that carefully, we can notice that between the facts and the emotion, we had to tell ourselves a story that triggered that negative emotion. And so, we learn with that insight to stick with the facts. To get curious by asking the person, "Tell me what purpose the drumming finger serves? Is it making you feel more relaxed? Is it meant to communicate worry? Let's talk about just that..." without allowing yourself to fill in the story which really belongs to the finger drumming person, not to you. And then once you have their story from the facts it will trigger more appropriate and [00:28:00] helpful emotions like compassion. So, I highly recommend that account of how we get from facts to emotions and end up in this emotional hole that then becomes very hard for both us and the person to get out of.

Colleen Pelar: And I think that loops so beautifully back into being a bold learner because it's the curiosity piece; it's not thinking I already know. It's saying what don't I know in this situation? What else could I understand here? And so, your curiosity in asking someone to tell you a little bit more – “what's going on for you?” It creates the human connection. But it also solves some of these entrenched patterns where we start making up stories that are not helpful or accurate.

Susan Friedman: Absolutely, when you recognize that at least a large part of your not bold behavioral repertoire, your [00:29:00] shy behavioral repertoire, or risk-averse behavioral repertoire is due to your learning history. Then you have to offer the generosity that the person who you're calling a jerk is also only reflecting their learning history. Yeah, and it's a very nice place to come from, you know, it's a nice operationalization; a nice definition of compassion is understanding that you are the result of your learning history. It's not that you're a bad person. It's not there that there are things inside you that prevent you from being more what I wish for need you to be, but that you reflect your learning history and that that's flexible just like our own goals are. That our own behavior due to our own learning history. The idea of getting curious from facts, asking questions, takes a lot of discipline [00:30:00] because there are reinforcers in those negative emotions. There are reinforcers for us when we get annoyed and point fingers that alleviates us from responsibility of the other person's behavior. And really, it's a lot about blaming and negativity pushed on the other person. But that idea of getting curious before getting cranky, it's a really great meme to remember and building your skills to, without attitude, asking questions about why someone is or isn't doing what you expect them to do. Yeah, it leads to a lot of really productive and loving behavior.

Colleen Pelar: Yes, and we all need more of that because that is fills us back up. And that's right where we need to be as trying to find the positive emotions and all of this and the connections with other people.

Susan Friedman: Absolutely and doesn't that address the [00:31:00] other interest you shared about burnout, and fatigue in working with animals and their caregivers?

Colleen Pelar: Yeah. So, approaching each other with curiosity is really one of the best ways for people to support one another, you know, just to see – how are you? What's going on with you? What's going well? What's not going well? How can I help? All of those pieces that we kind of jump in our heads to thinking we already know the answer.

Susan Friedman: Absolutely and what a beautiful thing it is for our relationship; for you and I to always trust that is to have the experience from our past history to predict that if I make a mistake, you're just going to ask me about it. There isn't going to be the account that triggers the negative emotions. I'm going to hold at the fact plus curiosity step in our interaction, and the more I do that with you, and you with [00:32:00] me, the more I trust that will be how we work together in the future. Yeah? So that we're more free to give each other feedback that is critical. Critical feedback, but without the negativity. That's part of it being a bold learner is to be able to learn in an environment where you understand your mistakes are going to be embraced as opportunities to learn something together, and not to

lose my esteem, or my confidence or right? This all works together and when you get it working that way, people who are fearless, who are not afraid to make mistakes because they're in an environment where mistakes are only opportunities to learn something, and so their cherished for that. You get some really great outcomes on a team.

Colleen Pelar: Well, I think that's a beautiful summary. So, I think we'll choose to wrap it there because that really summed the concept up very, very well. [00:33:00] I do have one question I'd like to ask my guests and I know you have two dogs and I like to have a moment of being a little anthropomorphic where I say, if one of your dogs (you can just pick either one) could speak English and I were to say. "Tell me a little bit about Susan," what would your dog say? What's your dog's view of you?

Susan Friedman: So interesting. Amazing question, and I'll tell you with honesty because I'm bold. The first thing that came into my mind unfiltered was that they would say I am very consistent. I am very consistent, very predictable with my interactions with them. So, that's a funny thing to have come into my mind; it's rather plain, but I wanted to share honestly and then when I thought about it a little bit more I, would I guess they would say I'm very affectionate. I am constantly, by that I [00:34:00] mean hands on. I'm nibbling literally with my open mouth on their snouts and then I follow that nice three-second rule that we talked about when we were together last, the "Pat, Pet, Pause." I'll pause, and I move away and sure enough that black lab comes right back in and presses against me for me to bite him again. So, I always say I'm a homo sapien for that label. I mean, I need to touch everything with my fingertips and I need to move it closer to my mouth. So, I'm sure that they would have those two things in there somewhere.

Colleen Pelar: That's awesome. Okay, so, if listeners would like to learn more about you and your work where could they do that?

Susan Friedman: Well, probably the easiest and most fun place is my Facebook page, which is [facebook/behaviorworks](https://www.facebook.com/behaviorworks). All one word ([BehaviorWorks](https://www.behaviorworks.com)) [00:35:00] and if you're listening from the British Isles, you'll want to keep the 'U' out of behavior because just this week that was one of the debugging solutions we found. [BehaviorWorks](https://www.behaviorworks.com). And then there I put small videos up of great training or teaching of all species including children. And then I write a little paragraph about the training and philosophy that [BehaviorWorks](https://www.behaviorworks.com) in my work embodies or advocates. So, that's the most fun. And then I have [BehaviorWorks.org](https://www.behaviorworks.org), and I have about 35 articles, lots of fun graphics – one of which says 'unlabel me', and all sorts of things that your listeners are welcome to download, use, distribute, and disseminate in any way they want. Everything on [BehaviorWorks.org](https://www.behaviorworks.org) is available to your listeners, and there you might find an interest in looking further into my online [00:36:00] course, 'Living and Learning with Animals' that I teach every August, and I have a special edition of it coming in January because I didn't want to say no to the waitlist people; they were too pushy. So, I caved and said, "let's do one more", and that's a really good example of the style of shaping bold learners. There's a lot in the way that course is run that reflects the things that were important to you that we talked about today. So, that would be how to get in touch with me

anytime. There's an email link on my webpage BehaviorWorks.org and people are welcome to use that as well.

Colleen Pelar: That's terrific. I'll make sure all of that is in the show notes so that people have easy access to that and I really appreciate you coming on talk to me about being a bold learner today because I think that there was a lot of application to that phrase, but also the strategies behind it. What does it mean and how can [00:37:00] we use it. So, I hope that our listeners will feel that they can apply some of this in their own life because that's what it's really all about. isn't it? Actually doing something, being bold and taking action, and doing something with what we learn.

Susan Friedman: It's doing something in small steps. And I really appreciate the questions you asked because my answers are in large part due to your questions; how you frame your questions. So, good job. We were a good team today.

Colleen Pelar: We were a good team; very bold; both of us. So, it was a lot of fun talking to you today. I really appreciate you coming on UNLEASHED (at work & home).

UNLEASHED (at work & home) is all about finding practical, sustainable ways to apply positive psychology to improve the lives of veterinarians, veterinary nurses, and other animal care professionals. Protect yourself from burnout and compassion fatigue by listening to the podcast, participating in a workshop, or scheduling private confidential [00:38:00] coaching with me. Details about all of the programs can be found at www.ColleenPelar.com.

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