

What Happens When a "Behaviorist" has Dinner with a "Trauma-Informist"



[EMILY READ DANIELS](#)

Let me tell you, dinner with a behaviorist is an experience, a somatic experience. Lily (name changed to protect her ;-)) and I shared Indian food two nights ago in Keene, NH.

As I shuffled into the restaurant ten minutes late (typical me), I rounded the corner and saw her sitting at a table for two. I beamed; I knew I was in for some rich discussion and a total "nerding out" session.

Lily and I are former colleagues. We worked together for only a year, but it was my first year in a new school. Lily was there — someone safe whom I could confide in. She is a school psychologist by training, but a self-proclaimed hard core "behaviorist." She even holds that title in her current job.

The year we worked together, I often burst through her door, flopped on her couch (psycho-analytic style) and proclaimed, "God damn; these kids are killing me!" I was drowning in my new role as a teen crisis counselor. Furthermore, I was working in a school that wasn't familiar with unconventional means of counseling — like mindfulness and aromatherapy.

Lily listened to me bitch — a lot — about frustrations with trying to help kids in a system that relished the status quo. One of the biggest struggles was whether or not I was allowed to "service" special education students because I wasn't a school psychologist. I was like, "who gives a crap — kids should work with who they connect with." See...that was trauma-informed thinking before I even knew what trauma-informed was. Lily always listened to me and in those days, we worked on crafting behavior plans together. We were both supporting some of the toughest kids — kids with entrenched patterns of truancy or substance abuse or high levels of aggression. We really cared and wanted to help our kids in the form and fashion they needed. Which is why I was eager to have the conversation with Lily about how behavioral approaches ARE NOT trauma-informed and how much of what we did together did not help our kids and may have even hurt them.

As Lily begins to explain her perspective on behaviorism, I feel my insides start to tremble. I can feel my nervous system activating. I am trying really hard to pay attention to what she is saying while being mindful of my body's stress response. Lily contends that behaviorists are only concerned with "surface, observable" behaviors. They identify the function of the behavior and determine how to reshape the behavior to meet the the function in a more adaptive manner.

"We all do what we do because we have been reinforced to do it," Lily said. "If someone irritates someone to gain attention, we just have to teach him to get his need met in a more adaptive way and reinforce that positively."

I tell Lily the story of a kid that had been ignored by a teacher (on purpose — per his behavior plan) because he was asking her questions that were off topic to the task. The teacher ignored the boy and he asked louder and louder and began shouting. She turned her body away from him to "withdraw attention further" and he began to scream and eventually struck the teacher. Lily explained that this was likely an "extinction burst."

I was quiet. I was really listening to what she was saying. But I was shaking inside. Of course nothing she was saying was new to me; I had a shit ton of behavioral training in my 15 years as a counselor (I chaired PBIS in one of my first schools). What I was trying to do was reconcile the behavioral perspective with my trauma training. THEY DON'T. They don't align.

That kid I was describing was a special education student with a history of trauma. The teacher's effort to reshape his behavior may have triggered a body memory of neglect or abuse. Whether that is what happened or not, it doesn't matter. The teacher did not feel good doing what she was doing and neither did the kid. In some ways, trauma-informed is really simple: human beings are human. We need to treat each other humanely. When we all become robots or some product of artificial intelligence, then a behavioral approach may be appropriate. Otherwise, we need to hang it up and be human instead.

And just so you know, Lily acknowledges the limitations of behaviorism too. She says she thinks it's probably not an appropriate modality for most kids with a trauma history. I wish she could announce that to all our area school districts that have multiple behaviorists on staff to deal with challenging classroom behaviors. Fortunately, her saying that ushered in my settling response — she regulated me. I was able to embrace her with much warmth as we departed. I can't wait till I get her more trained in practicing from a trauma-informed paradigm. Then she can become a "behaviorist in recovery."