

Tim Houlihan: Welcome Russell Goldman to the Behavioral Grooves podcast.

Russell Goldman: Happy to be here.

Tim Houlihan: Glad to have you here. We'd like to start with a little speed round with unicycle or bicycle?

Russell Goldman: Bicycle.

Kurt Nelson: Coffee or tea?

Russell Goldman: Tea.

Tim Houlihan: Travel with no itinerary or a set itinerary?

Russell Goldman: Changing itinerary.

Kurt Nelson: Changing itinerary? I like that.

Tim Houlihan: Changing itinerary? Interesting.

Russell Goldman: I can't get stuck in these forced choices here.

Tim Houlihan: Apparently not.

Kurt Nelson: Alright, Michelangelo or Monet?

Russell Goldman: Monet.

Kurt Nelson: Alright.

Tim Houlihan: Okay. Great.

Kurt Nelson: Good!

Tim Houlihan: So your work is broad and varied. Right but we would like for you if you would share a bit about information avoidance. Talk about a big picture story about information avoidance and some of the things that you've discovered in some of that work.

Russell Goldman: Yeah. I got very interested in the fact that people tend to not want lots of pieces of information that would be very useful to them. So, economists usually think that information can only help you make better decisions. Why would you not want to know something and then find that you could have made a better decision if you knew? And then you look around and ordinary people, there's lots of things they don't want to know. So, people they're eating dessert, you

say, "Do you want to know how many calories are in that piece of chocolate cake?" People don't want to know that.

Kurt Nelson: I don't want to know.

Tim Houlihan: Count me in on that one!

Russell Goldman: You ask people, "Do you wanna know what might be causing that symptom you have? You've got some swelling there. You've got a lump. Should you get it checked out?" People are like, "Maybe it will go away, I don't want to know." Right, if it reaches a point where it's impacting their lives, maybe they need to deal with it. It'd probably be wise to get it checked out before it impacts your life, but a lot of people say, "I don't want to go to the doctor, I don't want to know that."

Kurt Nelson: And so what have you been finding with this information? So what is your research pointing to? And what are you looking at? What are you trying to discover?

Russell Goldman: My research is trying to figure out, why do people avoid information? So, there's a lot of this empirical research that documents that people do avoid information that would be useful. I do some theoretical modeling that tries to say, "Can we put this in a framework where we understand why this happens?" The pieces of the framework that I focus on are belief based utility.

So, that people care about their beliefs not just for the decisions they make based on these beliefs, but certain beliefs are nice to have and other beliefs are not nice to have. So thinking that my dessert is really unhealthy, is not a nice belief. Thinking that I'm about to be sick, or that I might have a serious disease, is not a nice belief. And then you need something more just not liking certain beliefs. Because, in principle it seems like before you decide not to get the information, you must already have some fear of this bad outcome. It's like, "Didn't you already suspect that you had this bad thing going on that you didn't want to believe? So how does getting the information make it worse?"

What we think is going on is, attention. You get the information and it forces you to pay attention to it.

Kurt Nelson: Interesting. To your point, when you talk about information avoidance with disease, I had an Aunt, who literally went into the hospital and died a few days later from some stuff. What we found out later is she had lots of symptoms going into this many months, many, many, many months in advance. But she just chose not to get it checked out. What you're saying is that there is this element of a belief utility that she's probably going, "Yeah, I kinda know something but I really don't want to know that."

Russell Goldman: I don't want to know it. I don't want to have to think about it. So, if I go to the doctor, I can't not think about what could be wrong. I go about my daily business, then it's not top of mind, and it doesn't bother me as much when it's top of mind.

Kurt Nelson: Does this fit into a broader story of our desire to avoid things in general? Avoid unpleasant experiences? I'm thinking of any kind I don't like to cold call so I'm not going to be a sales rep. I'm just gonna push that off. I'm not going to do that. Is information avoidance part of a larger narrative?

Russell Goldman: Oh yeah. Generally, people try to avoid uncomfortable situations and there is nothing irrational about trying to avoid a bad outcome. That is totally normal. The odd thing about avoiding information is that it seems like, even if you don't get the information, the bad state of the world is still there. Even if I don't find out that I'm sick, I might still be sick. The thing that you need to wrap your head around is that it's not just the physical consequences of being sick that are bad, but the knowing that you are sick is bad. The finding out about it is what's bad, also, on top of the actual being sick.

Kurt Nelson: So what is the research you are doing on this? Help us understand specifically how you are going and identifying these and figuring out what's going on?

Russell Goldman: So what I do is I build theoretical models. There's been existing models that say that people care about their beliefs. They care about anticipatory utility. They might have anxiety, if they are afraid of something bad happening. There's some debate then, does this really explain the patterns?

If you have the anticipatory utility, but you don't have this kind of attentional component it seems like you might be happy with information, you might be unhappy with information depending on do you like finding things out in general. But these models don't tell you why would you not want information about these negative things and still want information about positive things. The research that I've done is to try to create a model that sort of tells a story about why do we avoid information about certain things and not about other things. It's not like we avoid all types of information it's like you really giving me a gift here. I wouldn't be like, "I don't want to open and find out what it is." That's information I'd be really comfortable getting.

Kurt Nelson: So are there particular categories that we have a more normalized or common level of avoidance?

Russell Goldman: I think it does tend to be unpleasant things. We avoid information about anything unpleasant.

Kurt Nelson: Yeah cause it's really focused on the information side it's not actually trying to avoid the experience. Like you said, that's inevitable.

Russell Goldman: Yep, in fact getting the information is maybe even helpful in avoiding the negative experience. If you find out you are sick you can get the doctor to treat it.

Kurt Nelson: Before it becomes so horrible that there's no longer any cure for it or any kind of prognosis.

Tim Houlihan: I'm thinking about Laurie Santos at Yale. She's got the GI Joe effect. Yeah ,this fallacy where GI Joe would end his TV show by saying, "Now that you know, knowing is half the battle." That's a big problem, because we don't even want to know in some cases, it sounds like.

Russell Goldman: You've got the government tries to come in and tell people all sorts of things that they think would be good for them to know. Like calorie labeling. It would be good for them to know. They'd make better decisions but they don't want to know that. Calorie labeling doesn't really work because people don't want to know how many calories are in their dessert or in their Big Mac.

Tim Houlihan: Wow, I was using it today uh this morning at breakfast actually. I was fully aware of it.

Kurt Nelson: Did it make a difference? Cause I noticed you picked one of the higher calorie components.

Tim Houlihan: Oh God, so you were watching too!

Kurt Nelson: I picked the nice low calorie fruit basket. There you go.

Russell Goldman: I certainly like having the calorie information available to me, but I think most people, they don't want to know. I think there can be some backfiring there also. You're gonna have people who say, "I want to make sure I get my money's worth. I want to make sure I'm not still hungry after I order this meal. So I gotta get something that is high enough calories." I can imagine somebody says, "I'm gonna make sure to get something really big. I don't have to finish it." Once they get it, they're probably going to finish it.

Tim Houlihan: Yeah, right. Like the studies on whether you get a medium size or a large size popcorn. You'll probably eat about the same percentage of the popcorn. You just eat more.

Kurt Nelson: We had a conversation yesterday in regards to just this same thing of calorie information and the component we may get some of that information. Oh, I was really good not ordering the burger and I ordered something else.

Tim Houlihan: I didn't get the cheese on the burger.

Kurt Nelson: Yeah, so now I feel justified getting the ice cream sundae at the end. Overall calories are much bigger. There's a lot of components that come into all of these elements. So help us then as you are thinking through this information avoidance component. With your findings then, how to people apply this? What are some of the ways that this could be used by, maybe not our listeners, but policy components or other things that are moving forward? What do you hope to gain from knowing this information?

Russell Goldman: A big picture, we'd like people to get medical attention before things get serious. We do think that these pieces of information the government wants to distribute or that policy makers might want people to know, these are worthwhile goals. You want to encourage people to get testing for sexually transmitted infections or something. We think getting the information actually is worth it we don't want to dismiss the concerns people have the reasons why they avoid the information, but I think that people tend to be focused on the present. Finding out the bad news is going to be so horrible and they maybe forget that they're going to adapt to it, and its not going to be the end of their life, but in fact they're gonna get used to whatever bad news they get. If they can take some actions going forward, they can be fine with it and actually be better off.

But then, because the reason people are avoiding the information isn't just like a mistake, but its cause they have these really deep feelings about getting the information, its very hard to design programs where you actually want to get people to be receptive to what you want to tell them. I don't have the solution of how you get people to get tested, But I think that understanding the resistance to why they are not getting tested is the first part of trying to come up with a good policy.

Tim Houlihan: You said that before we went live, you are working more toward curiosity. You are kind of moving away from information avoidance more toward curiosity. Can you tell the listeners a little bit about some of the work your doing in curiosity.

Russell Goldman: Yeah, curiosity is sort of the antidote to information avoidance.

Tim Houlihan: Okay, fair enough.

Kurt Nelson: I'm curious about this. [crosstalk]

Russell Goldman: Actually, initially had an interest in curiosity, which is what got me interested in information avoidance in the first place, and now I've researched it in the other direction a little bit.

Tim Houlihan: Its just not ironic enough that curiosity would actually lead you to information avoidance.

Russell Goldman: Its like what are the bounds on curiosity, was one of the first things I was thinking about. Then, how can we understand these situations where people aren't curious? I eventually came back to thinking about how can we relate these two things together. I mentioned attention being a big part of what I think is the story of information avoidance. People don't want to pay attention to these beliefs that they are very uncomfortable with. I think the flip side is that when people are paying attention to what they don't know, it often makes them very curious. Attention to these questions that you have that you don't have answers for, George Loewenstein and I call them information gaps. Attention to these information gaps makes you curious. We've got this theory that allows for both curiosity and information avoidance, and we've got some nice experimental tests of some of these predictions about curiosity.

Tim Houlihan: Oh, well share. Share this.

Russell Goldman: We think what are the ways that you get people to pay attention to information gaps. One thing you could do is you could make it salient. You could bring it up in conversation. You could prime somebody to think about it, or in the flip side if you want to make something less salient, you could just let some time go by after you raise the issue. We give subjects a test to take. Can they identify emotions based on just a little small cropped picture of peoples' faces? You get to see just their eyes. Can you figure out their emotions just from seeing their eyes? We think the people may be somewhat curious about how good are they at reading faces like this. We give them a chance to find out how well they do on this test.

Tim Houlihan: Compared to?

Russell Goldman: In one case, they get to find out right after they took the test. Another case, a whole day goes by before they get the chance to find out. A whole day goes by, you're not so curious anymore, it's not salient anymore. Another thing that we think can affect curiosity is just how important this question that you're asking yourself is and of course information can be important for a lot of reasons, it could be important because you use it and that's not particularly surprising if that's why you're getting the information, but it could also just feel important even if it doesn't have any usefulness to you.

So we give people a series of trivia questions and we set it up so they can get a bonus if they get all the trivia questions correct and eventually we're gonna ask them how curious are they for this last trivia question which is really hard and so most of them aren't getting it correct and they're gonna see are they curious about it but in one case all the questions before it were pretty hard so by the time they get to the last one they didn't really have a chance at the bonus anyway they weren't gonna get them all correct. The other case the initial questions were all easy and then they get this one hard one and that's really the difference between getting the bonus or not now its too late, they didn't get the

bonus but are they curious if this was the difference between getting the bonus or not, it felt really important to them and now they're much more curious.

Kurt Nelson: Interesting.

Tim Houlihan: That's a fascinating experimental model to get to that.

Kurt Nelson: Well, it reminds me of the component and I forget what its called but it's the missing an airline flight by one minute and how upset you are versus, you know, my I got stuck in traffic and I'm forty minutes late. Yeah, you still missed the airline flight, but the level of your vividness or whatever how important that is and like "Oh, if" and you kind of go back in your head "if I would have only done this"

Russell Goldman: Yeah, so we've done a lot about like how do we think of importance, we've got like a formal definition in our paper, but we thought about counterfactual thinking, one thing is that when something is in the future there's all this uncertainty about how its all going to go so uncertainty can make something feel important 'cause there's a lot of different ways it could go some could be good some could be bad. When something's in the past then it's already happened and it no longer feels very important because it's like the only way it could have gone is the way it went, and so that's just how it was like it's not important 'cause there's no other way it could have gone. So counterfactual thinking you're sort of forced to think about how else it could have gone but it's not so natural for people to think about how else the past could have gone it sort of went how it went and its inevitable.

And then other things that affect importance are just like self relevancy, so if something feels like it's really is about you its just gonna feel a lot more important than if its about some stranger. So in the context of you know as an antidote to information avoidance I read a newspaper article and I don't know the source here I don't know for sure if it's true, they were claiming that president Trump wasn't reading his presidential security briefings so I can't speak to whether this is true or not but what they said was that the national security team that was writing the briefings took to placing his name as many times in the briefing as possible to try to get his attention. To me this is exactly like trying to make something seem important, we're just gonna throw your name out there a bunch of times it's gonna seem self-relevant and might make you curious about it. They got the right idea.

Kurt Nelson: So whether or not it's true if they were doing it, it would be a good thing based on the information and research that you know of.

Russell Goldman: Yep, it's a good strategy I think.

Kurt Nelson: It's a good strategy. Very interesting.

Russell Goldman: I want to go back to this idea thinking about the future which is uncertain and so things become more important as we're framing them as future decisions and the past is less important because, well, it's just done. That seems to kind of focus on the results, right? On whatever the outcome was rather than the process or the process of either decision making or the process of getting to wherever we were. It is our natural tendency to focus on the results. If the result is unknown and I can't easily predict it then that becomes more important to me. Even avoiding or skipping over how important the process of getting into the future is just thinking about the result. I'm editorializing and thinking about other conversations that we've had and so,

Tim Houlihan: I'm a big sports fan and so you notice this in scouting where like if a player turns out to be a great player they're looking at the result like, ya know, did I predict this? They're not thinking about the process of like should we have expected a certain draft pick to actually turn out well what could we expect? So thinking about how you can make better decisions I think it's clearly the case that focusing on process is a better metric for what something a good decision than focusing on outcome but it's not intuitive to people to do that.

Kurt Nelson: Well and I think that's a great component and you kind of think about all of the other factors of that happening too, right? And even like the coach's decision to do these plays if it results in a first down or results in a touchdown yeah that was the right one versus not and even if you look back and say well yeah eighty percent of the time that worked and this was just the twenty percent that it didn't and now it's a bad decision versus good ya know, all of that. That's a whole,

Tim Houlihan: A few years ago the Seahawks had an interception at the one yard line, it's easy to look at the outcome but is it a bad process? I don't have the expertise to judge that, but I wouldn't assume it was a bad process just 'cause maybe they had some bad luck.

Russell Goldman: Just because the outcome wasn't what all the fans wanted or what anyone wanted I suppose

Kurt Nelson: Well the Patriots wanted it

Russell Goldman: [crosstalk] Well the Patriots wanted it but the Seahawks did not want it, that's right.

Kurt Nelson: Well Andy Duke talked about it, we talked with Andy Duke and she wrote about that in her book [inaudible] but she said they did some research afterwards and then of the seventy-some plays and I'm gonna get me wrong and the numbers right that year that were a pass from the two yard line or less there were no interceptions there's like sixty percent completion and forty percent dropped and so if you actually look at that you're going well, yeah that was a second down play they would get a component where they either would get an extra



play out of it because now they don't have to run the time out there's twenty seconds on the clock and the likelihood is either it's gonna be caught for a touchdown or it's an incomplete which then gets an extra play. So yeah, the decision to do that, great! The outcome, not so great for the Seahawks. So you look at that and it's a really interesting component in thinking through that. But we digress, we go down rabbit holes all the time.

Tim Houlihan: Yes we do.

Kurt Nelson: I want to go back to the importance, you talk about the self-relevance and I do a fair amount of work with organizations around their incentive plans. We always get this component of people of the organization saying look we don't have to put a lot of effort into how we communicate an incentive plan because people are really curious about their own pay and there's a component to that that I believe in but I also have this component of belief that we need to make that information as saliable as easy to understand as actionable to so that people don't have to read through five pages of statistics and text to understand how they get paid. I don't know if you have any component of is there work that says yeah I'm curious up to a point but if there's so much work going into like trying to figure out how I get paid even though it's really relevant to me that I just make some heuristic components and don't really get into the details but I just make some generalizations then on now my curiosity is solved and that's pretty specific I don't know if there's anything that you would be able to pull out from that.

Russell Goldman: We certainly do think that the cost of getting some information matters. It could be a monetary cost but could also be an effort cost, so when I was describing our curiosity studies before I just said people were more curious but if you really pushed me you could say well how did I know they were more curious what was my dependent variable here? So we didn't just ask them, ya know, on a survey how curious are you? Instead, in one of these studies we said well you're going to need to click this button if you want more information, that doesn't seem like any cost that just seems that's free but then they click the button and we told them click it again if you want the information. They click it again and we told them click it again if you want the information, so this begins to feel pretty annoying to them and so the question is how many times do they keep clicking to actually find out. [crosstalk]

Tim Houlihan: You're adding a lot, you could add a lot of friction.

Russell Goldman: Yeah, so that's exactly what were doing is we're intentionally adding friction to find this information out to see like what kind of effort cost are they willing to go through.

Kurt Nelson: Three clicks, five clicks, twenty clicks. [crosstalk]

Russell Goldman: Yep, eventually if they clicked it ten times that's when they got it. But we didn't tell them ten, to them they think "is this thing broken?" Like "this is annoying."

Tim Houlihan: So how many people gave up? Where do they give up?

Russell Goldman: I'd say it's a mix. I think about half the people when in the condition where we were getting a lot of curiosity about half the people clicked straight through all ten times. And then you get some clicking earlier they might just give up at any point in time.

Kurt Nelson: But you did find that if they were less curious about it that they,

Russell Goldman: Then they didn't do as many clicks.

Kurt Nelson: Right. And so then that's the dependent variable.

Tim Houlihan: Yeah, that's very cool. Let's turn over to a musical leaf. If we could for just a minute.

Kurt Nelson: What? Why are you, you're going music?

Tim Houlihan: Can we, are you, did you have-

Kurt Nelson: No, go music, you always go music. I'll be curious about what musical question you'll be asking.

Tim Houlihan: Well, you, Russell you like bluegrass, you like jam bands

Russell Goldman: Yeah, I'm a big fan of jam bands.

Tim Houlihan: Are you a big concert goer?

Russell Goldman: Um, I was a concert goer, when I was younger, before having kids.

Tim Houlihan: Okay, great concert experiences that you, that come to mind? Vivid, wonderful?

Russell Goldman: My favorite concert experience has been going to the great blue heron music festival in upstate New York. It's only about a two and a half hour drive here from Pittsburgh. It's a small music festival, it's not huge. Very friendly community, friendly people. The headliner every year is a band called Dawn of the Buffalo.

Tim Houlihan: Dawn of the Buffalo headlines every year?

Russell Goldman: Every year, yeah. It's like their festival.

Tim Houlihan: That's what it sounds like. That's a hell of a good gig. Uh, okay, so what makes it vivid for you?

Russell Goldman: They've got a couple of different performance stages they just have everybody sort of dancing, enjoying themselves and some years we've been there and it's been super rainy and you'll get like a good layer of mud on the ground in front of the tent and so we've taken to calling it the mud foot festival.

Tim Houlihan: Oh there you go.

Russell Goldman: Uh huh. I can also remember a few of the characters from the festival. I've seen a guy using a watermelon rind as a hat there and that's pretty memorable.

Tim Houlihan: That is memorable. Wow. Are you introducing Dawn of the Buffalo to your kids?

Russell Goldman: Oh yes, we have little dance parties in the living room and gotta get them listening to our music instead of being forced to play baby shark for the hundredth time.

Kurt Nelson: I am so glad my kids did not, they're above the age of baby shark because I have just heard so many people that are just, it's just that component of,

Tim Houlihan: Is baby shark just earworm central or what is it about them that the baby shark thing that's just, I haven't heard it. We're gonna have to have a link in the shownotes I think.

Russell Goldman: Yeah so there's like hand motions that go with it, there's the grandpa shark that doesn't have teeth, so there's like a whole story here and the kids just get into doing the hand motions, the music is catchy, I mean it's not bad the first time you hear it but after a hundred times the kids keep going and I want something else.

Kurt Nelson: Yeah, as we talked with Jeff Gaelic yesterday about [inaudible] you know and this whole component and we talked about music and that very backed up,

Tim Houlihan: Simple, a simpler tune is easier catch on to but it's also quicker to fade.

Russell Goldman: Yep, yeah, so part of like in jam bands they often sort of go on and like new directions with their music so you might catch a song you've heard before but have them play it in a different way.

Tim Houlihan: So the complexity adds to the desire to stay involved, to stay interested in it.

Russell Goldman: Yep.

Tim Houlihan: Yeah, that's pretty terrific

Kurt Nelson: Very good. I don't have a music question, you're looking at me like I should have a music question.

Tim Houlihan: Yeah, why not? You could.

Kurt Nelson: I am not the music guy, you know this.

Tim Houlihan: You love jam bands, you grew up on jam bands, your whole life has been about jam - Oh no, that's somebody else, sorry.

Kurt Nelson: Sorry. I'm looking at you very curiously going like that information is wrong, I don't know where you got that. So, Russell, thank you this has been very informative. I'm just fascinated to see where this goes.

Russell Goldman: It was my pleasure.

Tim Houlihan: Yeah, thank you.

Kurt Nelson: Good.