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Colbert to put UMass expert on lying to truthiness test

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AMHERST - You can bet that Stephen Colbert will have a field day with University of Massachusetts psychology professor and interim dean Robert Feldman.

Feldman's book "The Liar in Your Life: The Way to Truthful Relationships," is scheduled to be released in August, and for the occasion, Feldman will make the rounds on national television programs, among them "The Colbert Report" and "Good Morning America." He will also be interviewed on National Public Radio.

Feldman has made the study of human deception and lying a focus of his research over a 30-year career. His latest book on the topic is scheduled for release Aug. 3.

"I think lying is part of everybody's life, and what the title of the book suggests is that we all have liars in our lives and that people lie to us all the time," said Feldman. He was recently promoted from associate dean to interim dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at UMass.

"A lot of the time those lies are not very profound kinds of lies," he acknowledged. "Sometimes they're just social niceties, like agreeing with somebody when you don't really agree with them just to be pleasant."

Feldman is fully aware that he is not likely to be pleasantly agreed with when he goes one-on-one with Colbert on Comedy Central.

"That's the one venue that I'm most concerned about," said Feldman. "The advice that I've gotten is not to try to be funny. The best approach is just to play the straight man."

Feldman's publicity people have told him that before the show, Colbert comes in and talks to people in the green room.

"He's very nice, he's very friendly, he's just a regular guy," Feldman said. "And he says, ¿Out there I'm going to be a character. I'm playing a role. I'm not going to be so pleasant out there, but just remember that it's just a role; it's just what I do.' "

Nonetheless, the 61-year-old UMass professor said he is looking forward to the appearance, even if it is a little nerve-wracking.

"I think it will be fun," he said. "Fun and a little daunting, but I'm excited because I'm excited to talk about the book, and I'm excited to meet Stephen Colbert."

The heart of his research

Feldman said he likes talking about his research because he believes it is both interesting and important for people to hear.

"It's good for people to know it, because it's so easy for us to lie and for us to lie without even thinking about it," he said. "I think that is something that as a society we need to work on."

He likes to spread the word about that.

"We commit these lies very often without even thinking about them because it's so much a part of the social fabric," he said. "That's what I think is really important for people to be aware of when they're being deceptive."

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So how often does the average person stray from the truth?

Feldman says when two people are getting to know each other, they will each lie an average of three times in a 10-minute period.

Often, said Feldman, the lies are said to make another person feel better by agreeing with them. Other times, people fib to make themselves look better. But, he said, whatever the reason may be, a major motivator for deceit is that it is relatively easy to get away with - and in some cases, it's part of an unspoken social contract.

"People want to hear the lies in that if I say to you, ¿I'm on this diet, do you think I'm losing weight,' I really want to hear that yeah, I'm losing weight," Feldman said as an example. "Or, ¿Do you think that this coffee stain on my shirt shows,' I really want to hear that it doesn't show, so I'm ready to accept it. In many cases we're willing accomplices of those who lie to us."

Feldman says even those who are most vigilant in questioning what they are being told only have slightly better than a 50-percent chance at determining if someone is being truthful or not.

He said people often look at the wrong cues and can confuse nervousness or anxiety with lying. Though polygraphs are somewhat better lie detectors than humans, even those machines make lots of mistakes, Feldman said.

This behavior, he said, applies to all cultures, he said, but could be particularly pronounced in the United States because of past high-profile figures who have been caught lying and faced few consequences, like former President Bill Clinton.

"It was pretty clear that Clinton had not been completely honest with the country and yet he ultimately ... he went through a difficult period politically, but ultimately he was exonerated and he's a very popular figure right now," said Feldman. "So, that's a very powerful message to society, when you have someone who is high in prestige, who is very powerful and who lies and ultimately gets away with it. It really gives you the message that it's OK to lie."

In his book, Feldman writes about "active honesty assessment," or 1the idea that a person should think about whether whoever they are talking to is telling the truth as the two are conversing.

"It can't be the major thing that we do when we're talking to somebody else, but it does need to be in the back of our heads," he said.

However, Feldman said lying is still a reality that is tough to avoid at times.

"Being able to go along with some of those social niceties is important, but at the same time I think it's important to keep in mind the ultimate lesson that it is important to be truthful," he said. "These little lies make it easier to move into bigger lies, so it's a slippery slope."

Slippery slope? That's one of Colbert's favorite topics. Wonder what he'll have to say about that. And will it be truthful?

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