

Our Dogs, Our Mirrors

By Deb Mickey

Dogs look to us for many things; food, water, shelter, love, but they also look to us on how to behave in uncertain situations. How we react to situations often influences the dog to react in the same manner. This can be a good thing, and this can be a bad thing.

If we feel fear or uncertainty, our dog will be frightened and uncertain or, at very least, uneasy. Our actions color our dog's perception of the situation. Take, for example, the dog that is unsure of or acts aggressive toward other dogs. If the owner is worried about what will happen when meeting other dogs, his dog will pick up this uncertainty which reinforces her fear and she probably will act aggressively toward any dog that approaches (fear is often masked as aggression). We see this most often when the dog is on leash. The owner's uncertainty travels right down the leash. Owners also often inadvertently add to the problem by tightening their hold of the leash or by pulling their dog away, which transmits bad vibes to their dog and makes their dog uneasy. If not too conditioned in this manner, these same dogs often are fine around other dogs when unencumbered by the leash.

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Whatever the situation, if we act matter-of-fact and with confidence, our dog will mirror our state of mind. So, in the above scenario, if we brainwash ourselves to act as if the dog coming toward us will be friendly, and as if our dog will be friendly, and we seem confident (and we refrain from tightening the leash!), our dog will perceive our calmness and good thoughts and may feel more at ease when meeting dogs.

Other situations can be colored by how we react to them. Has your dog ever stubbed his toe and began to limp? We, of course, are immediately concerned and check to see what's wrong. Have you noticed that as soon as we dismiss the boo-boo, the dog stops limping? But, if we had continued "babying" the dog, the dog would have kept limping? They certainly can play our heartstrings!

Fear or phantom pain isn't the only emotion we transmit to our dogs. How many of our dogs joyously and excitedly rush to the door when the doorbell rings? Can we step back and look at what *we* do when the doorbell rings? Are *we* jumping up, dropping everything and rushing to the door ourselves? The dogs are mirroring our emotions and actions.

If dogs mirror our emotions and actions, we can use this to help the dog in stressful or uncertain situations.

The whole object is to change the dog's state of mind from fearful, defensive, or uncertain (or overly excited), to confident, happy, and assured (or calm). Here are a few methods to help a dog overcome some of his fears or uncertainties:

“Jollying the Dog”

“Jollying the dog” is acting happy and cheerful in the presence of what scares the dog.

If the dog's problem is loud noises, set up a situation where the loud noise can be on demand, such as recording it on tape. Start with the volume low, and praise, cheer and act happy in the dog's presence while playing the tape. As the dog becomes relaxed with the noise at this volume level, gradually increase the volume and repeat the cheering act.

If it's thunderstorms that frighten your dog, your task is tougher since you can't always be home when a storm approaches. But, if you are home and a storm approaches, try jollying the dog during the storm, acting like the storm is the best thing that could happen. Again, record storms on tape so you can control the volume and control when you can work on this problem.

If the dog tries to do something physical, such as jumping over an obstacle and he fails, laugh and cheer so the dog is not frightened to try again. Praise the dog for the attempt.

Distracting the dog

If you can get the dog to play with you when hearing the scary noise, or when the scary people or dogs are approaching, then you can

distract the dog from fixating on what bothers him. Again, what *you're* feeling will color this, so be sure to enjoy the game yourself!

He'll still hear the noise and/or see what's worrying him, but his emotional state of mind will go from frightened to joyful as you play your game. He may, in time, associate this joyful feeling to the very thing that once scared him, i.e., when he sees what originally scared him, his emotional state relates it to the play and the good feelings of the game.

Desensitizing the dog

Another option is desensitizing the dog to what bothers him. The clicker method of training works wonders here and we at Fieldwood can give you more information on clicker training, if you wish. But, the basics of desensitizing a dog is to have the problem object (another dog, children, whatever) placed at a distance within sight of the dog, and reward the dog with treats and praise for not reacting negatively toward the object. Praise the dog if he looks at the object in a casual, non-threatened way.

As your dog becomes comfortable with the object at this distance, move your dog a few feet closer to the object and again, treat and praise the dog for ignoring or not reacting negatively to the object. Slowly decrease the distance until the dog can be very close to the object and ignore it or forget that it at one time bothered him.

Use Your Voice Properly

Use a happy, jolly voice rather than a sympathetic voice. A sympathetic voice increases your dog's feeling there really is something to fear. Beware of saying, "It's ok," or "There's nothing to worry about." If you are saying the words, you're transmitting unsure thoughts even if your voice is cheerful. Rather, praise the dog for being brave, even if he really isn't being all that brave!

All these methods take time and perseverance and no negative corrections should be given. If you seek help for these problems, be sure to get help from someone qualified and who uses positive, gentle reinforcement methods.

Changing a dog's state of emotion toward a situation is not fast or easy. The longer the dog has had to negatively react to a certain situation, the longer it will take to change his mind. In some cases, the dog's emotional state cannot be totally changed, but it may be improved.

But, by far, the biggest step to help our dogs in uncertain situations is to control our own emotions and help our dogs "think pleasant thoughts." Dogs are our mirrors. What do you see when you look into your dog?

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