

THE CELLAR STAIRS

Vaccinating your dog against stress

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By the time you read this, our training company will be moving into a new, permanent home in downtown Derry, NH. We spent the past eight months working out of the space of some very kind and generous friends on the Seacoast, where we'll still meet with our advanced students once a week. But for the other six days, we've plunged into the relative hustle and bustle of a blossoming border town and left behind the bucolic fields and quiet training room of our friends' place. Our new location offers several entry points to the facility: four different doors make traffic control easy, even on the busiest day. There was only one way into the old place, though: down the cellar stairs.

The immaculate subterranean training room on the coast could only be gained by getting dog and handler down a set of steep bulkhead steps. Most puppies and many adult dogs can have issues with descending a staircase, even a familiar one. But these steps were challenging even for stair-rushing fools. Although our own dogs would all happily plunge into the cellar without hesitation (cat-like Corazon would race up them backwards, butt-first, then back down again, just to show off), none of them started out that way. Standing on the topmost step, looking into the dark abyss of the bulkhead, even a confident dog would usually hesitate. At that critical moment, I would tell the handler not to worry, that this was typical and he should just stay calm and help his dog. What I wouldn't tell him is that the cellar stairs were a kind of test: not for the dog, but for the two-legged student. How the *handler* handled the stairs would tell me much about his mindset regarding his dog.

You may have guessed from my byline: “The Canine Contrarian” that I have a lot of pet peeves about the world I inhabit, this Dog World. One of the most deep-seated prejudices I bear is against that loud, hysterical bunch who believe that a dog showing even the slightest sign of stress during the learning/training process is being horrifically abused by his handler. These are the hovering hyperanalysts who see every yawn or flick of an ear as a screaming klaxon warning that MY GOD, THAT DOG IS *STRESSED!* They obsessively search for minute changes in tail carriage, vocalization, eyelash alignment, anything to justify something they can criticize and hopefully “save” a dog from experiencing. Like ethological birdwatchers, they jealously catalog and parse examples of canine body language, growing ever more subtle and obscure until they have guaranteed themselves a sort of supremacy among their own geekish ranks. Or, as I’ve heard it summed up by a like-minded associate, they become fixated on “How many Border Collies can dance on the head of a pin”. They’ve taken a legitimate part of dog training, the interpretation of body language, and turned it from a subtle art to a fundamentalist religion. And according to its most rabid cultists, unless your dog remains in a perpetual Stepford-like state of glassy-eyed, hectic, demanding behavior, he is suffering stress. And Dog knows stress should never happen in the learning process.

I get it, don’t you?

Example: when I was learning how to drive, you know, I *never* experienced stress. Not once! And during my test, the stone-faced cop who sat next to me in the passenger seat morphed into Mr. Rogers on Ecstasy and we sang happy driving songs as I changed lanes, observed speed limits and parallel parked in a fuzzy mental bubble bath of acceptance and belonging. No stress at all.

Actually, I was a rigid, paranoid deer in the headlights, capable only of quavering, monosyllabic answers to the officer’s occasional questions. I was a poster child for stress, for performance anxiety, for standing on the sheer cliff of the really bad choke, toes curled around the edge, suicidally tempted to look down. I was the offspring of a stress monkey and a stress puppy, eating a stress sandwich and chasing it down with a shot of stress.

I was pretty darned stressed.

Relaxation techniques previously offered to me by well-meaning friends evaporated. But in the vacuum the deep breathing and visualization left, *my training took over*. All of the good habits I had learned with my driving instructor, sometimes under duress, clicked into place. I focused, I

kept my mind on the task, and I just *drove*. And you know what? I got my license. Today, to quote Raymond Babbitt, I'm an excellent driver. Knock on wood, no accidents, not so much as a parking ticket, and my truck has become a home away from home where I can blast the Ramones and enjoy an iced coffee between appointments, and a safe, mobile haven on the long distance roadtrips that I've been lucky enough to take. The stress I felt during the learning process was worth it because it gave me a level of freedom and confidence I never would have achieved otherwise.

I think of my role as a trainer of humans and dogs as one who teaches my students to *handle* stress, not the one who constantly tries to protect them *from* it. Because no matter how much you may want to, you can't control the world. You can only control your reaction to it. Good obedience training means you can teach your dog to control himself in the same way when he's presented with a stressful situation. I've met and worked with dogs who were obviously very bothered by cars, loud noises, men with beards or the smell of tobacco, among other triggers. Trying to constantly protect a dog like this from his personal demons will only frustrate the owner and make the dog even more neurotic. Sometimes those very efforts of delaying or avoiding a little emotional or physical discomfort take on a life of their own and become what I term "unnecessstress": refusing to use a crate because your dog doesn't like it, then constantly bringing him to the vet because of obstructions or gastric distress when he eats your stuff would be a textbook example. This doesn't mean that you plunge your dog into his phobia hoping it will go away (I've seen some real disasters from people "flooding" their dog at the advice of a behaviorist). But it does mean that if you can expose your dog to the small amounts of stress that might arise in training situations, showing him that he can not only survive them but master them, you'll be preparing him for those other situations that you can't influence or calibrate. It's like giving him a vaccine against stress by introducing a small amount of it into his system.

When this concept comes up in training discussions, it's where we often hear the argument from owners (and more disturbingly, some "trainers") that your dog should never have to do anything that she doesn't "want" to do. Of course, I'm sure that if you asked young Fluffy how she felt about checking into the local veterinary hospital after a twelve-hour fast so that she could be doped up on dog drugs, spreadeagled on a metal table and relieved of her reproductive organs, she'd jump up and down for joy. What's that you say? Spaying is for Fluffy's "own good"? Well, isn't learning to trust in her owner's confident guidance for her own good, too?

Which brings us again, to the top of the cellar stairs.

Waiting there to enter the training room for the first time are Ellen and Lisa and their dog Layla. Layla, a vibrant Lab mix, is here to work on self-control around other dogs. She is very reactive and has made walks and visits difficult for her owners. As we approach the stairs, her owners tell me that she'll most likely have a problem: after all, she refuses to go down their own stairs to join them in their TV room. This might be a little too much for her. As predicted, she balks and starts to pull backwards. Ellen and Lisa try to talk her into calmness, but this isn't going to work. The time for telling, explaining, apologizing is over. It's now time to simply show the dog that she can do it. I hold Layla's leash, it's taut now as she tries to dig in and refuses to go forth. Lisa and Ellen go down the stairs ahead of me. At my request, they keep their words to a minimum, but quietly encourage any signs of forward movement. Layla's tailset is low, she is panting and obviously stressed. But to carry her down the stairs is not reasonable; she's not a small dog, and I'm a fairly small person. Also, that will give her the wrong message and will not teach her what she needs to know. I reach out and gently place one front paw on the top step. She recoils. I do the same thing again. Maintaining pressure on her, I add the second paw. This is the moment. I give her a slight increase in pressure on her leash, and she is suddenly at the foot of the stairs, happily greeting her owners. They are thrilled that no one had to carry her, and that she visibly overcame her worries *once she knew that she had to do so*. There was no anger, nothing personal about it: just two kinds of pressure. One, an internal pressure from fear of the stairs, and the other an external pressure from a calm, persistent handler. One kind of pressure Layla didn't know how to control. But the other one she could control, simply by yielding to it. The reward of going forward was substantial in itself: her owners' praise and joy made it even better. The following week, Layla hesitated only for a second before confidently bounding down to her training lesson. And not long afterward, I got a happy email message from Lisa letting me know that Layla finally went down her own set of scary stairs at home and had joined her owners in their TV room rather than nervously waiting alone at the top of the steps. The "stress vaccine" did its job, and now Layla was immune to what had been a limiting phobia.

Helping a dog through stress often requires us to apply pressure when we instinctively want to remove it. But we aren't protecting our dogs from anything by taking that approach. Into each life, human or canine, some psychological rain must fall. How much kinder it is to capture that

rain and quickly channel it so that something good might grow where it lands, rather than it is to keep your dog living in a false desert of avoidance. I love our new place, but how I'll miss the fertile microclimate of the cellar stairs: the first place where many of my students, human and canine, gained the confidence that leads to freedom.

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