



The Canine Reaction to Change *Maureen Ross, MA, CPDT-KA, 11/1/11*

The old saying, “the only constant is change,” needs clarification when it comes to the Dog. Rather, it might be, “The only constant is *resistance* to change that isn’t understood as beneficial by the one being asked to change.”

You can find numerous approaches to training and behavior modification (rehab) techniques, tools, equipment and ways to implement change. I find that one of the biggest roadblocks in canine coaching sessions is a willingness to embrace change -- even in small amounts.

The good news is, it’s CHANGING! More trainers / behaviorists are keenly aware that each dog is as different as his/her human. After returning from the [18th Association of Pet Dog Trainer’s Conference](#), I’m please to share that we are getting positive and vocal about “how” to create change for dogs. I have been training dogs since I was a child. I had parents who thought that hooking a dog to a doorknob was adequate punishment, and would teach them not to pee in the living room. Obviously, it didn’t work!

My preference is an individualized approach, based on my training as a counselor. I can help owners create positive change for themselves and their dogs if they are committed to it with an opened mind. Ah, the open mind and the brain!

Normally, you are introducing change to get you from where you (or your dog) are -- to a more desired or preferred state. Taking into account the various species, mixes, genetics, environment, history and brains, humans and dogs share similarities, including emotions.

Our good intentions to change any behavior, ours, employees or our dog’s will more likely get a desired outcome if it is genuinely understood as beneficial, involves win-win and is fair. Rather than create the change and institute it with force, strategies and electrical equipment, how about engaging the dog in the creation of the change just as you (or I) would want to be informed and engaged in a project or new experience?

Let’s explore.

Repeatedly, I hear about how dogs are habitual creatures, preferring sameness, routine and the same dog kibble. We know the dog kibble is a complete myth based on marketing. That doesn’t mean that all dogs should eat raw meaty bones either. Many dogs and humans enjoy and require structured lifestyles, sameness in diet, and that’s okay, as long as it is safe and healthy.

Here’s why:

The human brain likes to maintain homeostasis to guard the body from threats. What is a threat for a human or a dog? That depends. For some, hearing a cat meow poses a threat, while for others a bomb could explode and they would search for the source. Dogs are similar in their reactions. Think about snuggling down for an evening with hot cocoa, a good movie and your dog. Suddenly, no-one expected, starts kicking on your door with steel-toed boots, yelling, “I’m going to kill you.” What is your reactive response as opposed to say a telephone ringing?

The answer may surprise you. The last time your phone rang, what happened? Did someone you loved die unexpectedly? Conversely, have you been trained and/or desensitized to know

instinctively that in danger, the best thing to do is take a deep breath, know that you locked the door tightly, your cell phone is right here; you called 911, grabbed a weapon and run for safer place with your dog, until help arrives. Do you have a back door? Dogs react similarly depending on hard-wiring and experiences. A Chihuahua might shake, while a Rottie may signal with his paws “open the door let me at em”. It could work in reverse, no pun intended. I have heard ferocious barks coming from Yorkies that could make a grown man pee. Some people are [Calm in Chaos](#) while others panic if their toothbrush is missing. Some big dogs are wooses while little one’s think they can conquer a bus.

What is Fear?

Fear is a chain reaction in the brain that starts with a stressful stimulus and ends with the release of chemicals that cause a racing heart, fast breathing and energized muscles, among other things also known as the fight-or-flight response. The stimulus could be a spider, a knife at your throat, an auditorium full of people waiting for you to speak or the sudden thud at the door.

What is PTSD?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can occur after you have been through a traumatic event. A traumatic event is something horrible and scary that you see or that happens to you. During this type of event, you think that your life or others' lives are in danger. You may feel afraid or feel that you have no control over what is happening. Anyone who has gone through a life-threatening event can develop PTSD. This includes dogs!

Change disrupts and confuses a state of normalcy. The natural reaction to interference of homeostasis is for the limbic system to engage, creating the proverbial fight or flight response. With dogs, it may engage a reactive versus curious response to a situation response - depending on experiences, associations and what they perceive as a threat *or not*.

Change can become emotional pain. Ironically, the body grieves familiarity and reacts to emotional pain the same as if it were physical pain. When you introduce a change, most of us are fighting to avoid it, because change means things will be different then what we are use too.

It helps to understand that in humans and dogs, the midbrain is command central! The [limbic system](#) is the complex network structure that controls emotions identically in human and dog. Evolutionarily, it is the most primitive part of the brain. Humans and dogs react to change in similar ways too. It is not uncommon for an adopted child or dog, although in much better living conditions, to freeze or act out. Transition takes time to process. This is the body’s way of coping. We have to learn how to cope in new situations.

The limbic system is made up of the amygdala (where aggression and fear are generated), the hypothalamus (the control center for stimulating secretion of hormones throughout the body), the hippocampus (is important for memory), and parts of the cerebral cortex (where behavior is organized and contributes to pleasure), and other structures.

The endocrine system and the limbic system are intrinsically linked; this is where hormones are produced and released. The limbic system is linked to the autonomic nervous system that is responsible for the **fight-or-flight response**. This is why physical responses are caused by emotions. Dogs react to stimuli in various ways. Some bolt, while others freeze. Many dogs drink excessively when their owners come home after having been away a long time. The secretion of hormones causes the dog to feel hungry and thirsty when the limbic system induces

the positive emotions of happiness and excitement. Sadness and confusion suppresses hunger and thirst in dogs, resulting in some dogs refusing to eat, drink or respond.

*The **parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS)** is one of the two main divisions of the **autonomic nervous system (ANS)**. The ANS is responsible for regulation of internal organs and glands, which occurs unconsciously. The parasympathetic system specifically is responsible for stimulation of "rest-and-digest" activities that occur when the body is at rest, including sexual arousal, [salivation](#), [lacrimation](#) (tears), [urination](#), [digestion](#) and [defecation](#). Its action is described as being complementary to that of one of the other main branches of the ANS, the **sympathetic nervous system**, which is responsible for stimulating activities associated with the [fight-or-flight response](#).*

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*The (ortho-) **sympathetic nervous system (SNS)** is one of the three parts of the **autonomic nervous system**, along with the [enteric](#) and [parasympathetic](#) systems. Its general action is to mobilize the body's nervous system [fight-or-flight response](#). It is, however, constantly active at a basal level to maintain [homeostasis](#).^[1]*

Sensory Overload

Most dogs' senses are higher frequency than ours (4-10 times greater). They see and hear in technicolor. Take a deep breath, consider how you feel when bombarded with sensory overload (SO) everyday (work, electronics, social media, family, friends, job and goals). There is no question that a large number of dogs are suffering from SO. Emotions are visibly expressed by dogs who are thrust into situations that might not be beneficial for them (dog parks, play groups, meet-ups, holiday gatherings). Observe their body language (ears, eyes, tail carriage, body positioning, excessive licking, aversion, displacement sniffing, cowering or worse, freeze and shut-down). There are behavior cluster charts available at [Dog Talk](#) and numerous ones online. Other favorites are [Sarah Kalnajs](#) and [Dr. Patricia McConnell](#).

Emotional glee with happy squeals and vocalizations are often seen when dogs greet human or canine friends (barking, growling, whining, yelping). A dog's tail ranges in wags as much as our human vocalizations do when we are happy, sad, scared or angry. There are numerous [body language charts](#) and books, with one of my favorite being [Turid Rugaas, Calming Signals](#).

So what's a leader to do to help create change?

Leverage what we are learning about the brain (dog and human) and apply it. How? Ask yourself, "What is change from a brain perspective?" Change in the brain is represented by new wiring. New wiring is created from insights that happen when we make a brand new connection in the brain. The brain loves insights, but it holds onto familiar patterns, competing forces. Practicing change gives the brain a break from ruminating on the same patterns of behavior, teaching new ones with awareness and focus!

We CAN rewire brains. When the basic needs are met, [Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#), we move up the ladder to self esteem and accomplishment. The dog is instinctual. So it makes sense to use insight in an instinctual way to rewire their brain. How can you get the dog to do something? What's the incentive? What's your dog's life rewards (high ranking items of value)? Figure this out and use it insightfully to release various brain chemicals associated with pleasure states.

Normally, change is introduced to get you from where you are to a more desired or preferred state whether coaching for a career, lifestyle or our dog's education. ***Rather than create the change and enforcing it (using various training programs, communication strategies and electronics) here's a brainstorm: let the dog participate in the change process.*** Engage s/he in the creation of the change with patience, direction and reward.

The first step is a Wellness Check. Is the dog healthy? Are you healthy and capable (physically and mentally) to change, at what levels and pace? It's different for everyone. It's okay to get help.

Remember the self help mantras we see everywhere to empower, enlighten and empathize? Guess what? Dogs need this too. In the process, giving dogs the opportunity to think and volunteer behaviors, helps us change ours! It is rewiring our brains to think differently about dogs and how they learn! Amazing!

Whether with dogs or humans, ***here are a few things you can do to improve your odds to get a more positive reaction during the process of change:***

- ***Temporarily Eliminate or Reduce Status in Exchange for Relationship and Team Effort:*** Create games and learning experiences where the dog's contributions are valued and they can participate without fear of retribution. Threats to anyone's status can trigger a fight or flight response. Minimize confusion and minimize that response. Dogs need what we need in any new or changing situation: being part of the process. Everything a dog does to US that we don't like, rest assured we've either taught them how to do it or not!
- ***Create Certainty:*** Let your dogs know as much as possible, in a way they understand, and as early as possible, throughout the process, what to expect. This will reduce uncertainty and reduce fear. If they are aware of what you expect them to do (get the ball) and you'll get a (treat), their emotional and animal brain response will be decreased.
- ***Introduce Autonomy:*** Provide options for how to achieve the desired outcome and implement change, and you allow them great control over their own fate. We all know it is good to engage dogs because it channels energy into positive outlets. Providing autonomy takes that to a new level. Engaging the dogs in games and training sessions that aren't boring, giving them choices, allows them to make their own new connections and hardwiring. They know because of your positive response to their choices.
- ***Communicate Relatedness***☺ People and dogs need to know whether someone (thing) is "friend or foe, beneficial or not." If your desired solution or path to change is not friendly, meaning it does not create a better world for them, (or they don't understand how it will), they will resist helping you achieve change as a team. Dogs (and people) may resort to helplessness, depression and/or stop trying or thinking. How sad.
- ***Ensure Fairness:*** If people or dogs sense fairness, they will work toward a common goal (gathering sheep, toys, food, and training with play afterward). If not, you are paddling with one oar on a big river heading for white waters. Inspire and aspire for balance and flexibility. With change comes the need to know when it isn't working, and needs tweaking.

By having your dog be part of the change you are trying to create, as a team, you are not only teaching and creating change, you are living and learning with dogs while becoming empowered, enlightened and empathizing with a different species. Given the cultural diversity in the USA (workplace, education, dog parks) what's not to like? It is connected to every facet of our lives (family, friends, and career). The response we get from humans or dogs will increase when our approach to change includes them in the process! Living and learning with dogs can change your life! Enjoy the journey!

