



FOCUSED TRAINING!

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We are being deluged with ways to eat right, exercise, meditate and be successful. Billions are spent every year on dog training tools. As part of the move forward to healthier living, we need to keep our pants on. Otherwise, we'll be walking naked, chewing on kale and ohming ourselves in circles.

I have lived with dogs from childhood and know this for sure: before you change your dog's behavior, you have to change your own. Training is ongoing for us and our dogs. It is an integral part of daily living, just as breathing.

Focused training is bringing a few moments of clarity to the training session. You and your dog are present and capable of learning. Dogs cannot learn if they are energetically bouncing off walls. Conversely, they can't pleasurably learn through fear. I don't know about you, but when I am learning something new, I want to be taught in way that I understand and with respect.

Breathing is a requirement for living. If you are blaze and really don't care if you dog lies down when you ask, that's fine. If you want to create a relationship where you can go places and do things, enjoying your dog's company, and have them respond when you say something like sit or come here, then focused training will help you accomplish that.

The truth is, I have had dogs all of my life, and I am still learning every day about behavioral patterns and communication. Getting dogs to do what I want is an effort of communicating. When I'm unglued or they are confused, nothing is achieved.

Fortunate to have good mentors, a friend of mine, Dr. Joan Cunningham, who has studied wolf behavior up close, reminded me: "never tell a wolf what to do, go get the wolf to do something with mutual respect. Convince them". I believe that this applies to our domesticated dogs as well, with the exception that they usually comply much easier with our peculiar (human) way of doing things.

It is a simple concept. If you feel crappy, your training will be crappy. If you aren't in the present moment and train with meaning, your dog knows you are full of crap. They sense meaninglessness instantly.

I've said it before and I'll say it again, "it's not just about the dog" it's about us being in the present moment, having an intention or purpose for what we are doing (it doesn't have to be lofty) and doing it truthfully.

BREATHING IN FOCUS!

Breathing is a necessity. Meditation dates back centuries. There is a difference between conscious and unconscious breathing. It affects our energy input and the decisions we make in any given second.

Deep belly (diaphragmatic) breathing fills up the abdomen, the core (the strong mid-section), around the ribs, and the chest. It massages every internal organ and cell. Exhaling fully and consciously eliminates toxins and stress. Our dogs do this naturally. When they wake or are stressed out, they breathe deep, exhale and yawn.

When you focus on your breathing for even 10 seconds, you bring yourself and your training practice to the present moment. When you let go of even the ride to training or the activities of the day, your training results will increase two-fold.

Some equate breathing with meditation. It's true they go together well. There are many forms of meditation and many ways to breathe. You can meditate in your car at a stoplight for a minute, in a temple for 3-days or in Tibet for 3-years.

Breathing is a form of focused awareness that brings you and your body back into the present moment. It is a gentle, pleasurable way of “slapping yourself awake”. It’s not just about being calm, although it helps. Oxygen enters your body and bathes your cells and organs. You exhale toxins and stress. The residual is clarity and pure energy.

Ask anyone who competes in heavy-duty competition sports what they are focusing on before the gun goes off. The adrenaline and endorphins rush, but it’s the breathing that keeps them focused to win. If you choose to train your dog a couple of times week on your own or in a class, it makes sense to breathe, center, set an intention and focus on that intention without judgment.

Ask yourself and your dog “how are we feeling today”? How much energy do we have? What do we want to focus on?”

I train my own dogs as an integral part of daily life. I am a pet-assisted specialist so I have goals with my dogs too. I want them to be desensitized to sights, sounds and smells, in a broad variety of environments. I want them to trust their relationship with me as a pack leader. This type of training requires some formal focused training.

CENTERING!

Like focused training, centering is being present. You can get there by saying “stop” to whatever you are doing especially if it isn’t working! Take a deep breath. Your body, mind and dog sense the change, which they will mirror. Calm = Calm, Conflict = Conflict – strive for Calm even in Chaos and a win-win situation where spirit and self-esteem is intact.

A sample metaphor for centering can be (don’t try this in real life, you’ll get arrested): picture yourself sitting in the middle of a baseball field during a game. There’s music, audience, players, balls flying around you; but you and your dog are sitting there breathing and observing. You’re enjoying the game or not! It’s your choice. You can stay or leave. Too much chaos, then picture yourself in a rowboat on a peaceful lake. Suddenly a motorboat zooms by, creating powerful ripples that send you squalling around. Stay centered ... the squalls will stop, but if you get up and start raging, you’ll land in the drink.

INTENTION

Set an intention (or goal) for your dog and your training practice. Do you want to focus on attention, long sits or stays? Do you have a sloppy recall? Set an intention to factor in a challenge for anticipation so your dog doesn’t get bored. Rank your dog’s high motivators and use these as rewards.

GET FOCUSED!

Focused training is knowing yourself and your dog’s needs in the present moment. Train in an unbiased way by learning from experiences without getting hung up on their results. You’ve set an intention; now focus on it with flexibility. Be a tree branch; bend, don’t break. Your relationship with your dog will grow and glow.

Life is a classroom. We are both student and teacher. Each day is a test. Each day we receive a message that we can hear or let go: com(passion), gratitude, surrender, faith, forgiveness, integrity, character, ethics (ICE), the list goes on and on. Learning with our dogs is something money can’t buy and credentials rarely produce. You have to walk the talk because dogs know phonies. Being the smartest, the fastest, the prettiest, the most talented, the richest, the poorest, the toughest or weakest can’t help. Being a strong enough person to be gentle and making a difference in even a small way by taking a breath, centering and using focused training with our dogs is a wellspring that trickles to other relationships in our lives.