

“Are we having fun yet?”

by Terry Long, CPDT-KA

(based upon an article published in *Dog World* in November 2010)

Frances had many different dogs when she was growing up, but she was especially captivated by a neighbor’s Brittany. When she moved into her own home, she decided to get one and dreamed of showing her in conformation and obedience. Frances worked long hours and was a little concerned about having enough time for a puppy so she was delighted when she found a breeder who had a sweet six-month-old pup for sale. Frances had the summer off as a teacher and decided that it would be an opportune time to get Molly in several shows before going back to work. It sounded ideal.

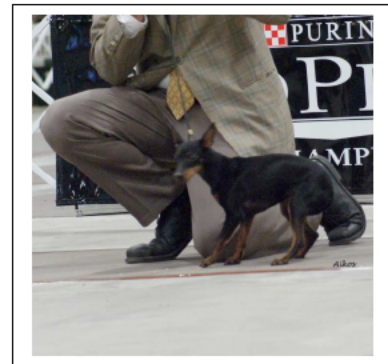
Instead, it was a disaster.

When Frances got to the show site, Molly didn’t want to get out of the car. Frances picked her up and placed her on the blacktop. Molly crouched low, belly to the ground, tail completely out of sight. After much encouragement, Frances was able to slowly make her way to Ring 8. She was thrilled to see so many Brittany’s in one place. As she entered the ring with all the other handlers, she realized she was a bit nervous, too! Her palms were sweating and her heart was racing.

Molly was pulling on the leash to get to one of the other dogs and Frances did what she saw other handlers do. She pulled back sharply on the leash and said firmly, “Leave it!” Molly started to sniff the ground next to Frances who, again, followed the other handlers’ cues, pulling back more sharply this time. “NO SNIFF, MOLLY, NO SNIFF!” Molly looked away, panting in the cool morning air. Frances tried her best to get Molly to run around the ring and worked hard to get Molly to stand up when the judge came over. Molly was having none of it: she pulled frantically to get away from everyone and Frances went home in tears.

Causes of Ring Stress

Performance sports require both human and canine to be at the top of their game. Stress in either species can result in lackluster performance or, worse, a psychological meltdown one end of the leash or the other. A look at the physiological signs of stress in both species (see Sidebar, “Signs of Stress”) show marked similarities. Let’s look at the human end of the leash first. Why do some people perform so well under conditions that another finds debilitating?



The human end of the leash

Enid Richey, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in the treatment of traumatic stress and a broad spectrum of anxiety disorders believes it is a result of both genetics and learning. “There appears to be a familial component to anxiety. Whether the cause is genetic or environmental, I have worked with multigenerational transmission of anxiety disorders.”

Dr. Richey has seen anxious mothers with very young children who, over a short period of time, develop anxiety of their own. In one case the mother was constantly cleaning her daughter’s face and hands and making comments about dirt and germs. In later years, her daughter developed an obsessive compulsive disorder with delusions about dirt and contaminated food. Dr. Richey has also seen patients with no family history of anxiety suffer from extreme anxiety.

The results are the same whether someone has a fear of public speaking or a fear of making a mistake in the performance ring. “Hypervigilance, often associated with ‘fight-flight’ phenomena, or startled response can impair a person’s perception, concentration, judgment, attention, and evaluation of a situation. A person’s brain can freeze or lock onto a detail associated with environmental stress and therefore not be able to pay attention to the situation at hand,” observes Richey.

When the person on the end of the leash starts to exhibit these signs of stress, the other end of the leash, in turn, becomes nervous or stressed. That is because dogs are uniquely attuned to our every mood. They watch every move, every change in expression, and they interpret what it means to them. When we get anxious near the ring, our dogs notice the difference in our behavior. If we get impatient with them in the ring in response to our own stress, dogs often start dreading going into the ring.

Deborah Jones, PhD, long-time agility and obedience competitor and co-author of *In Focus* and *Focused Puppy* agrees. Jones, a full-time psychology professor special stress at Kent State University, says. “When we become frustrated, angry, or stressed, our bodies release hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) which cause changes in our nervous system and organs. Our hearts race, we breathe fast and shallow, our hands might even shake and we move less fluidly. These signs do not go unnoticed by our canine buddies. “Dogs are exquisitely aware of all of these physical changes,” said Jones. “When they realize that the trainer/handler is in a state of distress, they may become concerned and distressed as well. When asked to perform, they may make an effort, but the behavior is unlikely to be of good quality. It’s like giving a person very bad news (“you just lost your job”) and then telling them they have to take an important exam (which they must pass) immediately. It is very difficult to concentrate and do well under those circumstances. “



Dr. Richey has some suggestions for those of us who experience ring stress. “Stress or anxiety management is simple and concrete. The problem most people have is in getting

in the way of their own thinking. Most stress or anxiety management techniques center on breathing. Mindfulness or being in the moment is a remarkable tool in stress management. Normalization of emotion is also very beneficial. It is quite normal to be anxious about performing!”

Dr. Richey sees a similarity between human intervention for anxiety and behavior modification techniques used in dogs. “Speaking from the human perspective, ‘perceptual restructuring,’ or changing an associated belief, is very successful in alleviating a person’s suffering. For example, a person who recently had a car accident might become extremely anxious driving near or around the scene of the accident. The person is conditioned by ‘perceptual association’ of that previous bad experience. The key would be to replace the previous negative association with a more positive one. Here, that would be safety. Some common interventions would be: gradual/graded exposure, systematic desensitization, and other non-avoidant based methods.”

Dr. Richey recommends books by Jon Kabat-Zinn or Jack Kornfield, both authors “good for anyone who wants to enhance the quality of life.”

The canine end of the leash

One of the most common causes of stress in our dogs is our inability to recognize their signs of stress instead of some kind of ulterior motive such as being “stubborn” or “dominant.” (See sidebar, “Stress in Dogs.”)

Vicki Ronchette is a Certified Professional Dog Trainer and owner of Braveheart Dog Training in Northern California which specializes in training conformation dogs. Ronchette’s passion about educating people about stress in the ring prompted her to write a book on the topic. *Positive Training for Show Dogs: Building a Relationship for Success* covers everything from early socialization, stacking, gaiting, and standing for exam. “I see so many dogs at shows that are highly stressed whose owners believe that they are ‘fine’ because they do not know how to recognize that their dog is stressed. People need to take the time to learn what stress signals look like so that they can recognize them early and help their dogs before they become overly anxious. I can't tell you how many times I have seen a dog sniffing the ground because he is stressed only to be yanked on the collar by the owner who is saying "NO SNIFF!" Of course, this stresses the dog more so he sniffs more, and this time he is lowering his body, he gets corrected again and, of course, he sniffs more with a lowered body and now tucked tail and it goes downhill from there.”

Jones agrees. “Stress signals can be quite subtle. Dogs are masters of body language and there are sometimes only tiny signals of upset or distress. For example, dogs that are uncertain tend to become slower and more cautious in their responses. Trainers might interpret this as ‘blowing me off’ and apply a physical correction in an attempt to increase the speed of the response. However, the correction can further ‘poison’ the exercise and cause the behavior to deteriorate even further. It becomes a downward spiral very quickly.

Jones says that different dogs react differently when they are stressed, depending upon their temperament. “Some dogs ‘stress down’ (perform more slowly and cautiously)

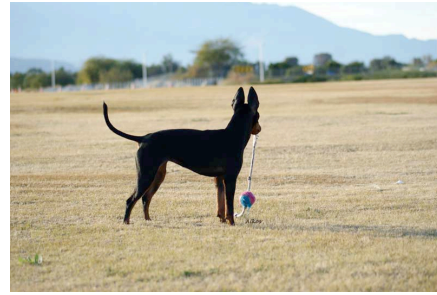
while others ‘stress up’ (become more frantic and active). People assume that if a dog is active, he must be having a good time, but that’s not true. The dog likely has become overwhelmed and is just mindlessly reacting.”

Other Factors in Canine Stress

There are other reasons our dogs become stressed in the ring.

Socialization

Ronchette believes that much of canine stress results from poor socialization. “I see a lot of dogs who have not been properly socialized become very stressed in the ring either because they are not comfortable with being in that close proximity to other dogs or people or to being touched by a stranger. All of these things can cause stress in dogs. It is so critical that we socialize our show dogs well, with lots of different locations, different people, and different dogs so that they are really well socialized and comfortable in different environments.”



In Molly’s case, it turned out that the breeder thought that exposure to her other Brittanys at home and being crated with her other dogs at shows was all she needed to do. In fact, socialization is much, much more than this. The critical socialization period is between 7 and 16 weeks of age, and it is during this time that puppies need to have *good* experiences with a wide variety of people, places, sounds, and dogs. “If a dog is at all fearful or uncomfortable about the show ring, other dogs, or people greeting him,” said Ronchette, “he is not yet ready to be entered. You first need to spend some time desensitizing the dog and slowly building a positive association with dog shows before entering him.” (See the end of this article for step-by-step instructions about “Desensitization and Counterconditioning.”)

Training

There is a wide variety of training required for each of the different dog sports. Competition obedience and agility, for example, both have reputations for requiring extensive training. The myth about the conformation ring is that next to little training is required.

Ronchette disagrees. “It does look pretty simple, but it's actually quite a bit more complex. The actual behaviors are pretty straightforward: gait, stack and be examined by a judge. But even the simplest of behaviors needs to be taught. Some people do little or no training with the dog probably because they believe the behaviors are so simple, and then they expect the dog to be able to perform these behaviors in a strange environment, with a boatload of different distractions, including other dogs and people around, and then get frustrated when the dog doesn't ‘perform.’ This, in and of itself can create stress in the dog. People competing in obedience or agility would never dream of competing with a dog that wasn't prepared for the ring, but conformation people do it all the time.”

Some trainers also believe that *how* you train plays a critical role in how the dog performs once in the ring. Jones believes that understanding the role of “classical conditioning” is key. “Training methods based on force, punishment, pressure or aversives are associating stress and anxiety with the behaviors that are being taught. When the behavior is cued, those unpleasant emotions are automatically triggered as well.”

Jones puts on her professorial hat and explains the science behind what happens when dogs associate bad things with specific cues or exercises: “Classical conditioning is a type of learning that involves making ‘stimulus–response’ associations. The stimulus (anything that the learner can perceive) automatically triggers a response. The response can be a behavior, such as an eye blink, or it can be an emotional state, such as fear. We actually learn emotions through this process. Classical conditioning is an ‘invisible’ process. Most people are not at all aware of it or how it works, but it is always in play and has some very powerful effects. In dog training, you are not only teaching behaviors through ‘operant conditioning’ (i.e., behavior–consequence learning), you are also classically conditioning emotions that become associated with the behaviors.”

In a case of negative association in agility training, an exhibitor found her dog avoiding the A-frame completely after her instructor grabbed her dog and threw it back onto the bottom of the A-frame after he had not stopped. The instructor did not understand the affect of classical conditioning when she used such forceful techniques. Fortunately, the dog was able to be retrained by a different instructor who lowered the A-frame and started over, using treats the dog loved, and teaching him to touch his nose to a small target at the bottom of the A-frame. Now, he charges up the A-frame with confidence and stops at the bottom without hesitation.

Jones sees the results of classical conditioning in training obedience exercises. “A cue or situation becomes ‘poisoned’ when it takes on an unintended negative emotional association. So, if a dog learns that ‘Rover Come!’ is often followed by a correction/punishment, he will soon dread hearing that cue. If a dog learns that the performance ring is a scary place because his handler starts acting very strangely, then he will associate the ring with uncertainty and stress and try to avoid it. If a dog is corrected with a strong punishment for making a mistake in a training exercise, that exercise now becomes associated with unpleasant consequences.”

Jones, who is owner-moderator of the clickcompobed Yahoo discussion list, recalls a case in point with her own first obedience dog, Katie, a black Lab. When she first started training Katie, she used collar corrections for being out of heel position. “The cue ‘heel’ had become associated with unpleasant events (the collar corrections) and resulted in lagging,” said Jones. “When I got to Utility, I knew I needed to use a signal only for heeling and decided to re-teach the exercise in a much more positive way. I gave Katie a crash course in ‘clicker-trained heeling 101’ and only associated it with rewards and a hand signal. Her heeling improved dramatically as long as I used the hand signal, but it reverted back to lagging if I forgot and used the verbal cue to heel. The difference was quite dramatic!”

Jones's recommendation is to use positive classical conditioning in all of your interactions with your dog, making the distinction between real life, play, and work seamless. "Make it impossible for your dog to tell the difference between training and play! Sandwich training between play sessions. Associate training with all the things your dog loves. Be exciting and unpredictable in training sessions. Keep training sessions short and highly exciting. You want to create a 'training junkie,' a dog that just can't wait to train and never wants to stop."

Take a deep breath

With a new understanding of how to recognize stress signals in your dog, how to manage your own stress, and the effect of classical conditioning, you and your dog are sure to be a winning team. Take a deep breath, try some mindfulness meditation, and play train your dog and you will both enter the ring as winners.

Signs of Stress

Signs of Stress	
<i>In Humans</i>	<i>In Dogs</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance of any situation where feared anxiety may occur • Heart palpitations • Hypervigilance • Irritability • Muscle tension • Nausea or dizziness • Poor concentration • Restlessness • Shortness of breath • Sleep disturbance • Startled response • Sweating • Trembling or shaking • Worry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Averting eyes from handlers • Avoiding handlers and their hands • Diarrhea • Dilated eyes • Excessive scratching • Excessive shedding • Flinching • Frenetic speeding up ("the zoomies") • Inability to learn new behaviors • Increased respiration • Increased startle response • Lip licking • Moving slowly • Muscle tension; tucking body in close (tail under, butt tucked) • Scanning the environment • Slow or no response to cues • Sniffing • Sweating (from the pads) • Yawning

Desensitization and Counterconditioning

Both humans and canine behavior counselors use a powerful behavior modification technique called gradual desensitization/counterconditioning. It is used to help dogs (and people!) overcome their fears and anxieties. For example, if your dog is afraid of a stranger approaching him (e.g., the stand for exam in conformation and obedience or proximity to a judge in agility), the following steps are suggested.

1. Determine how far away the stranger can be and your dog is still relaxed and not threatened. This will be your beginning “threshold.” It is important to keep your dog “under threshold” at each stage of this training. Any signs of stress and you are probably going too far too fast.
2. Get some really yummy treats that your dog will only get in the presence of strangers.
3. Be sure to relax, yourself! (Think about how you normally stand or sit when you are talking to a good friend.)
4. Have the stranger approach from an angle (not straight toward your dog) and only come as close as you’ve determined to be the initial threshold.
5. As soon as your dog notices the stranger, start giving him tiny little pieces of the yummy treat.
6. The stranger should only stay in place for 30-60 seconds, and then leave.
7. When the stranger leaves, stop giving your dog treats. Wait a few minutes before having the stranger come back.
8. Repeat this 4-6 times in your first training session and then take a break until another day.
9. Repeat these steps until your dog show signs that he now likes the presence of the stranger because it means he gets good treats. He might look for the treat as soon as he sees the stranger, or he might wag his tail.
10. Decrease the threshold just a short distance at a time and only when you see that he is happy to have the stranger in proximity.
11. Gradually have the stranger come closer. As your dog gets more comfortable with the stranger, the stranger might be able to look directly at your dog, talk to him, reach part of the way toward him, etc., until he can touch him.

Recommended Reading

- *Control Unleashed: Creating a focused and confident dog*, Leslie McDevitt (Clean Run Press, 2007)
- *It’s Not Just About the Ribbons: It’s About Enriching Riding and Life with Innovative Tools and Winning Strategies*, Jane Savoie and Sally Swift (Trafalgar Publishing, 2003)
- *Positive Training for Show Dogs: Building a Relationship for Success*, Vicki Ronchette (Dogwise, 2008)
- *Shaping for Success: The Education of an Unlikely Champion*, Susan Garrett (Clean Run Press, 2005)
- *Stress in Dogs: Learn how dogs show stress and what you can do to help*, Martina Scholz & Clarissa von Reinhardt (Dogwise, 2006)
- *What is My Dog Saying: Canine Communication 101(CD)*, Carol Byrnes (Diamonds in the Ruff, 2008)

TERRY LONG, CPDT, is a writer, behavior specialist, and agility instructor in Long Beach, CA. She can be reached at www.dogpact.com.