

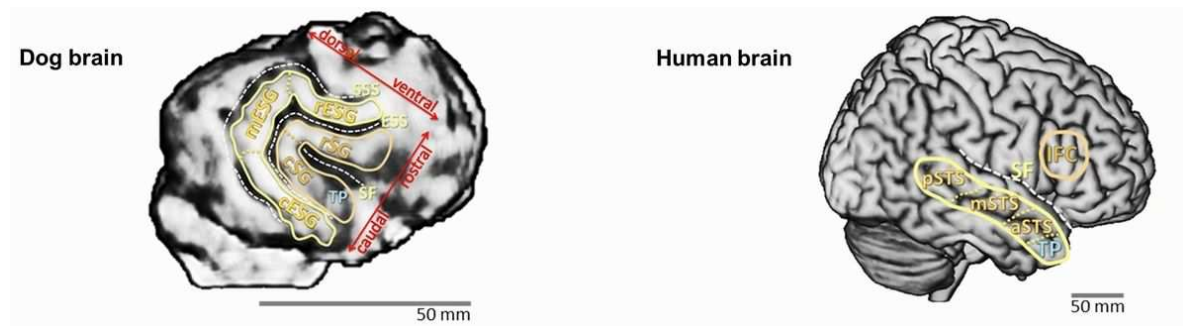
THE PSYCHOLOGY and PHYSIOLOGY of DECOMPRESSION

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All mammals have similar brain structures, says [Dr. JP McCue](#), a board-certified veterinary neurologist at NYC's Animal Medical Centre. The hemispheres, lobes (all those bumpy bits!) and parts of the brain have the same names and the same basic functions. But a dog's emotional response part of the

brain is much bigger- in other words, **they will always be able to love you more than you love them**, they are simply made that way. And we have bred them so that an entire patch of their brain is devoted to deciphering emotions in human and dog voices.



And compress is a complicated word. It's been around in our language a long time- over five hundred years and snuck in there from the Romans via French. In the most simple of terms, it means **'squeeze'**. But squeeze has so many associations and meanings now- we use it to mean anything from medicine or a tight bandage you apply to your skin (usually called topical) and squeeze down on it, to try and heal from the outside before we tackle the inside. It implies that *if we fix what's wrong on the surface, we will not have or need to look deeper to see if there is a root cause for the problem*. For short term issues, that's great, as they *draw out from the body any immediate dangers*, or 'and mental poisons' in this case, and then you can *throw away* the poultice. And this is a good way to mentally 'throw away' what's bothering you.

But it's like the difference between a small cut and blood poisoning- a compress can help with something minor or immediate, but *for major 'wounds' you need a different approach*. Quick fixes rarely work. But when we are given time to process, a quick fix is not what you are aiming for, and can result in issues down the line.



to making something take up less space, like computer files, or editing a book so it has less words. When you load a compressed file, the computer (your mind) *has to do more work decompressing* it so it's visible and editable. However, that compressed file is smaller on the disk, so your computer can load the compressed data from disk faster. So it feels like a good way to 'save till later' stuff that is bothering you. But things cannot stay squeezed together forever, and you do need to open those files again and take a look. **When these files are compressed, you can't see, hear or feel them.** In our minds, this is often how we store our memories, squashed down, because we've not had the time, space or tools to process them. They can fester in there if left to moulder away. Under stress/trauma, a reflex reaction in dogs and humans is to try and **take up less space than they do normally, to make themselves small and unthreatening in the hope the trauma will stop.**



It can even mean a hug that squashes all the air out of you, usually a 'bear hug' you weren't expecting to happen- another reason why we tell you to LEAVE YOUR DOG ALONE during quarantine and however long first stage decompression takes. It is tempting, but not healthy, to go into the space of a new pup and hold them tight, especially if they are crying- they are not ready for it, dogs don't have the body type to hug like we do, so to them it's too in their face and will combine the fear they are feeling with the love you are showing them- which is never a good move. Some dogs work out what they are, and even learn how to comfort you with a similar gesture once out of decompression, but *it is a learned response because they know it makes you happy*. But they never-because they can't

talk!- gave you any permission to hug them as they have no uses what one is till they interact with humans. A healthy bond is about boundaries, respect and understanding for how each other works.



Canine Stress Signs

Ears down

Half moon eyes

Head turned to avoid eye contact



So in order to have a healthy life balance, for you and your dog, it is important **you all know how to decompress!** Not just the dog, but you too will need to process your new dog, learn them as they are learning you, to have a healthy bond not based on fear, but rather mutual understanding of each others' needs. You too will need some time to sit off and think through what your dog has been through the day/week or even hour, how they might be feeling about it, and how you are reacting to it.



This could be divided up into five stages:

1. **FAR AWAY:** this is where we learn information about someone, or your dog, before we have met then and can make our own judgments.
2. **FIRST IMPRESSIONS:** that first encounter, where we immediately judge outward appearance and other observable characteristics and signals. *Your dog is VERY likely to different to the pics and vids you have seen at first too. Why? Because they are decompressing and don't know they can trust you yet.*
3. **ONGOING:** where we watch a pup over the longer term. What may have seemed cute at first can wear a little thin at this point but you must remember it's your reaction to what the dog is doing, not what the dog is doing, that is the

problem. But this is also the start of the healthy bonding period, after first and second stage decompression have been successfully navigated, and you really start to see the deeper side of your dog (and your dog is doing the same to you!)

4. **TESTING AND CHECKING:** where we learn about the dog (and ourselves, and the dog is doing the same to you, testing your boundaries- this can often coincide with a puppy fear stage (please read [our blog](#) on this) or puberty, by ‘testing’ how we think they are going to act in certain situations (for example, we may have started to walk our pup, starting on short walks, getting them used to recalling and feeling safe outside, and they may not find it fun at all at first!). The key is always *changing how we act with the pup* if we see we are causing them distress, as the dog will be doing the same for you even if it doesn’t feel like they are). And we work out if what we are doing is not helping our pups decompress by seeing- really properly observing- how they acts in response. What is your pup’s face and body telling you? They can’t talk with words like we do, so show their feelings in body language.
5. **LASTING MEMORIES:** where we store our memories of the pup that we never really forget. And, for our most important relationships, we have stored in our minds a picture of the person that is so vivid and lifelike that eve when they pass away, they are still ‘with us’ on many emotional levels.

Just like decompression itself, *there’s no timeline or target as to how long each these stages take. **But both sides need to put the effort in and want to learn about each other***, and that’s where creating safe spaces for all of you comes in.

Both of you need to be allowed to have time and space to process these very new experiences, without feeling *guilty or pressured to hurry up and go (back to) ‘normal’*; and not feel like you (or the dog!) are not ‘progressing’ as you should.

There is no time limit on emotions.



And **suppressing** them in you or your dog

- squeezing them away
- or not being given the chance to process them in a quiet safe place
- or being allowed a safe space to express them without being called moody or angry or 'aggressive' ('aggressive' is a human judgment of dog body language, and is usually totally wrong.)

is very harmful to psychological growth, both for you and your pet!

We are very prone to **blaming** ourselves (or the dog!) for things that are just part of the natural process of you both being in very new places, metaphorically and literally with each other. Neither know each others' internal rules and boundaries, neither even know each other's faces and expressions yet! So it's inevitable that misunderstandings, accidents and errors happen at first.

So what is DEcompression?

As you might think, if you put 'de' in front of a word, it turns it into the opposite meaning.

But what is the opposite of squeeze?

Unravel? Sounds very scary. We don't want this one to happen.

Unfold? Sounds very organised for emotions. So not a realistic expectation.

Release? That could work, as long as it's a safe environment to do so.

But sudden, excessive and/or unexpected noise sensitivity, resulting in barking, growling and more is as upsetting for the dog as it is for the humans- the dog is begging for your help and has realised you're not 'seeing' their low level distress, so they can't trust you. You have overloaded the part of their brain that processes their feelings about you. This is not a healthy bond at all. And it's your responsibility to fix it if this has happened, as you are the human and dogs see humans as their boss and centre of their world as a default **BUT YOU HAVE TO EARN IT- if you see this happening, **sort it out immediately, either with our live online support or using a qualified behaviourist over a period of time; just one session won't work!****

As we have said from the start, it's a bit like standing on a squeaky toy till it's flat. It takes a fraction of second to flatten it, but a lot longer for it to **reinflate** back to what *looks like* its normal appearance. Teaching them basic skills- giving them something to DO often helps as they are happy when they are literally 'made' by humans to please humans. But *inside they are not their 'normal' and need a lot longer* to make sense of every new experience they have. for you new dog these new experiences could include:

- the air and water smelling/tasting differently
- new food

- learning a new language)(dogs have the vocabulary and mental processing level of a 3-4 year old)
- new house rules when many of them never knew what a house was till now, and where to sleep, play or toilet
- new people, adults, and kids
- new buddies (other pets, resident, on walks/at play parks or visiting)
- walks (some have never had one till now)
- holidays
- doggy daycare
- going into dog friendly shops and cafes

You do not want to leave it till the toy is broken. And if you **break a dog's heart**, they have even further to come back from than humans, **before they can feel safe and happy again.** It may seem they are acting the same, playing, smiling, and so on, but this is because they **want to please you-** and they **KNOW when you stop loving them.** They pick up on **your tone, your body language**, even **micro expressions** on your face, and will become **depressed.** **This is how their brains are wired.**



We think **‘reinflate’** is the best word. While it does not necessarily mean they are back to their ‘normal’ it does suggest *they have been given the time and space they need to make sense of their new world, and work out they’re okay in it* without being **flooded with fear hormones**. This doesn’t mean you *take over their body agency and remove them* from what is bothering them (like picking them up and rushing them away from it, or yanking them away on a lead) as they will never learn these things are safe if you do that. Small exposures to new experiences from a safe space is the way to go here. Then increase the length of exposure to these new (scary) things once they have have chance to process the last one, and realise nothing bad happened last time... otherwise their **distress will only escalate**, which is no fun for the dog or the humans! It can take an hour, or more, for a dog to *visibly* calm down after a distressing new experience just the same as us- give them time to do it! So we advise, each time your dog experience something new,

use this approximate timeframe. This is whether they are

- a kettle or a lava dog treat them both the same as both are stress reactions when they arrive
- and taking into account that the older the dog, or the rougher their start in life,
- or the longer it took them to decompress when they first arrived at the rescue, shelter to foster- even PTSD might be a factor!
- or the fact they may be going through a pup fear stage or puberty

the longer the stages of decompression are likely to be.

FIRST STAGE DECOMPRESSION

A minimum of THREE TIMES as long to let them process the experience as the experience took. For example if you went for a 10 minute walk round the garden for toilet practice, go back in and leave them alone in their safe space for three times that time- $10 \times 3 = 30$ minutes. If they are still asleep **-and sleep is the way to go, and the best way for them to process-** at the end of that time, **leave them alone** till they wake up and (this is the important bit) come over to you for a primary need like water, food, or toilet, Or they may bring a toy over. If they try and engage with you too fast after a new experience they are not processing (kettle dogs!) it and they will not decompress, leading to issues like *separation anxiety (whining, pacing, crying), chewing, or toileting in the house* when they know they are supposed to go outside. They are showing you are they stressed, so don't blame them or shout **Back right off** and give your new furry baby the chance to work out exactly what just went on. LET THEM REINFLATE.



Don't forget, if you have a kettle dog, this could be their safe space-you! This is the hardest form of processing to ignore and *let them be*, to decompress. **Don't fuss or hold them tightly**, just be their neutral, safe 'blanket' or 'bed' for a bit. You feel *warm and safe*, and *your heartbeat* will remind them of their mum, buddies or siblings in the foster, shelter or rescue. Plus they are learning your smell.



SECOND STAGE DECOMPRESSION

A minimum of **TWICE** as long to let them process the experience as the experience took. For example if you went for a 30 minute walk, go back in and **leave them alone** in their safe space for twice that time- $30 \times 2 = 1$ hour. *Go back to three times as long if you were also teaching skills on that walk*, like recall, or taking them in a car for the first time or first few times to the walk. If in doubt, or they seem to showing low level distress like circling (not for a wee) panting or nose/lips licking; or turning their backs on you/turning away, **leave them alone**. Valerian or CBD oil can or an equivalent anxiety aid and still should be used in this stage to help them relax and process if this is happening.



THIRD STAGE DECOMPRESSION

A minimum of THE SAME LENGTH OF TIME to let them process the experience as the experience took. For example if you went on holiday for three days expect them to take that long to get back into their normal routine once back home. Double that if you went away without them.



Don't forget. this time is also for you! The joy of them finally doing a wee in the garden needs processing as much as the annoyance when you see your shoes are out in the garden-again!

Learn, and enjoy, your new dog!

And don't beat yourself up if you make mistakes, they are part of learning and as long as you can show your dog they are safe and the rules for them are fair and consistent. So please follow our decompression rules to the letter, use our four days a week 12 hours a day online aftercare service for any questions- and don't think you should just struggle on.

THE main reason for failed adoptions is incorrect decompression (especially when children who have not been shown what to do by their parents are a factor). Don't let it happen to you!

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