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TODAY OUR BREED EXPERT looks at how in tune our dogs are with our feelings:

HUMANS UNMASKED: Why you can never hide your true feelings from your dog

Years ago, when I was riding and training horses, I recall someone saying that “a horse can always tell when they have a more nervous rider on their backs – they can sense it and smell it”. And I knew that this was true, in terms of how differently any horse would behave, according to who was riding them.

But the same also is true of dogs, when it comes to how our own emotional states – as well as body language – will affect their behaviour in turn. Which is why so often anxious owners tend to have more anxious dogs. Or aggressive people more aggressive dogs. It is all to do with the kind of energy, or greater atmospheric and hormonal turbulence that is being exuded from our bodies, so often without us even realising it.

A fascinating study undertaken at Queens University, Belfast (Northern Ireland) further confirms how dogs can indeed ‘smell’ fear and stress, or just heightened emotional states in general, in their owners’ breath or sweat. See this link for more details on the study: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-63066715>

FEAR CONTAMINATION

Once we realise this, we can also better understand why our dogs can get so affected by not just by our own life stresses, fears and anxieties, but also any cues that we are entering a more emotionally elevated or hostile state. And then become more unsettled or reactive themselves. Particularly dogs like Border collies, who are so exceptionally in tune to their owners’ every change of body language, emotional state, or normal daily routine.

The truth is, in short, that we cannot easily hide what we really feel from our dogs.

This is such an important point to understand, as so often I work with owners who have more fear-reactive dogs; lunging or snapping out at any newer people or dogs who approach them. And if we look deeper at this, we find that the owner’s own tension or anxiety about this problem in their dog can be greatly fuelling or exacerbating it. And while such anxiety is totally understandable, and so commonly part of the ‘baggage’ that tends to come with owning dogs who behave like this, a better insight into their own state of mind can really help owners try to resolve their issue in their dog in a calmer and more effective way.

PAST FRIGHTS

The same kind of anxiety can develop in owners when their dog has been the victim of some past attack or less pleasant run in with another dog. In that they will carry the emotional baggage of that forward, every time they see another less familiar dog approaching, and communicate their worry or tension down the lead. So that their dog increasingly comes to associate the presence of other dogs with higher owner anxiety.

And again, it is perfectly natural for humans to feel dread about the prospect of re-facing something that was previously unpleasant, or even to want to avoid a possible recurrence of it. But unfortunately, it also never gets them any nearer to developing a more confident dog.

There is no point in just telling anxious owners to stop being anxious about what their dog might do, or what might happen to them in specific contexts. Any more than it helps telling people who are worrying about something not to worry. They must develop the confidence within themselves to change how they feel, over time, and with the right help. Because only then can they stop sending the wrong chemical messages to their dog, and break the whole cycle of anxiety.

Meanwhile, all aspects of the Border collie's senses, and 'supersensory world' are covered in BOOK ONE (blue cover) of my BREED APART trilogy – SECRETS OF THE WORKING MIND. And anxiety, stress, fear and aggression in Border collies – and how to deal with them – are covered in BOOK THREE (green cover) of my BREED APART trilogy; BEHAVIOUR: INSIGHTS, ISSUES, AND SOLUTIONS:

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