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TODAY OUR BREED EXPERT is looking at the issue of more acute sensory sensitivity in Border collies, and how to better understand and handle it:

SENSORY HYPERSENSITIVITY AND SENSORY 'FILTERING' IN THE BORDER COLLIE – AND THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF 'SAFE SPACES' FOR YOUR DOG

Recently a follower gave us an (ever growing) list of things that cannot be done in their house, for fear of triggering a more adverse reaction in their Border collie – i.e. “he barks around anxiously, trying to bite anything at head height and/or does a high pitched yelp/bark.” The list includes the following: “We cannot blow, cry, sing, use a pepper mill, chop or grate or whisk things, have fires, use scissors or sellotape, stir a cup, brush hair or use a makeup brush, wash the cooker or sides, do anything that creates steam (i.e. cooking, hot water, kettle), use a trampoline or any kind of electric tool.”

To some, this may all sound rather extreme. But those with greater experience of Border collies will be aware of their more acute levels of sensory sensitivity. As well as how quickly the list of sensory stimuli they will react to more adversely can grow or at times may seem never ending. And typically they will involve sound, light, movement or any sudden sense of ‘crowding’, or things quickly entering their personal space.

SENSORY OVERLOADING

All these reactions have at the heart of them the Border collie’s more reactive and excitable neurochemistry and how vulnerable they may be, as individuals, to sensory overloading.

It is so important to remember how much more acute a Border collie’s senses are compared to our own, and thus environments which we may deem pretty ‘normal’ or easy to tolerate on a sensory level – in terms of things like noise, movement or light levels – may be far less tolerable to them. Moreover the dog may not only feel compelled to mount some physical response to every sensory stimulus that hits their brain, but the cumulative effect of all these sensory ‘hits’, one after the other, can keep them in a more sustained state of stress. Which in turn then renders them even more reactive to any ‘newer’ sensory hit that comes their way.

So it becomes an ongoing vicious circle for them of sensory discomfort, mounting stress and higher reactivity thereafter to any extra external stimulus that comes their way. Very often I will see dogs in a more chronic or sustained state of sensory stress like this, and in truth it becomes the one major problem in their lives which then inspires many others.

SENSORY FILTERING

There is also no doubt in my mind, too, that some collies are far more vulnerable to this kind of sensory overloading than others. The roots of this may be genetic, or down to any number of other exacerbating factors like illnesses or medications that are having an additional impact on the brain or nervous system, or simply the nature of the daily environment the dog lives in, or is exposed to.

Dogs like these also just seem to have a less efficient sensory ‘filtering’ system, where the brain is better able to ‘mute’ down or simply ‘ignore’ noises or other sensory experiences they more commonly experience every day. Much like people who live right near airports or busy roads stop ‘hearing’ passing planes or traffic more acutely the longer they are exposed to this experience.

It is, if you like, the brain's self-protection mechanism, to avoid you being more constantly stressed by sensory experiences that are more constant or ongoing in nature. And while some collies are able to invoke this same kind of sensory filtering/subduing effect, when exposed to sources of sensory input that might otherwise be more overwhelming for them (like louder noises, traffic, crowds, your TV or other regularly used domestic appliances) others find it much harder.

It is almost like their brains are like a tortoise without a shell, and sensory experiences are hitting its delicate tissue, constantly, like a hailstorm. The stress from all the sensory input then builds ever higher, and may then need a physical outlet to release it. Which could be things like barking, yelping, spinning, developing more anxious or restless behaviours, or lunging out to try to nip something. Alternatively they may narrow in on one particular sensory source – a ball, say, or light beams or road traffic – and become ever more obsessed and fixated with it, as a way to better shut out all the other surrounding 'sensory noise'.

IMPULSE CONTROL

Another factor influencing more 'manic' physical reactions to sensory experiences concerns the dog's more individual levels of impulse control, or quality of their impulse control training. For as I have constantly outlined on this page, collies who are not consistently taught – or trained - how to better control their own physical, or emotional, responses to external events become totally at the mercy of every single sensory or emotional trigger that hits their brain, and then the immediate physical response that follows it.

Not only that, but behaving in this more extreme way to different external stimuli can then eventually become the dog's more preferred and ingrained habit.

REDUCING THE MENTAL AND SENSORY PRESSURE

Another factor complicating, or exacerbating, any dog's more extreme response to different sensory stimuli can also be an owner's reaction to them. For if owners get more heated, irritated or exasperated about them themselves, it just tends to add more fuel to their mental fire. And for the record, shouting at a collie to 'calm down!' or 'stop that!' never makes them calm down or stop it. Usually it just makes things worse.

So, apart from keeping calmer yourself, you will also need to teach your dog an alternative way to behave whenever they are hit by sensory experiences that trouble them, rather than just get annoyed at them, which is far more futile. If you are out when your dog is experiencing more extreme sensory stress, try to get them to a quieter place and make them sit or lie down and focus on you more intently (note: 'focus' training has been covered on this page previously) until they begin to wind down again, however long it takes.

At home, you will also need to greatly reduce the amount of sensory input that is hitting your dog's brain, which in turn will reduce their stress levels. To do this, you will need to construct a special 'refuge zone' or safe space where your dog can go to wind down, in total peace, whenever they are anxious about anything. This could be a crate covered with a blanket on the top and surrounding three sides, so it feels more like a 'den' to them, or under a table – often collies themselves will have found their own smaller or 'safer' spaces in your home they go to whenever they want to feel more secure. Try to ensure this 'refuge' place is as free from higher levels of sensory stimuli (noise, light, movement) as possible.

Once you have identified or constructed this safer space for them, you must then relentlessly teach your dog to go there, when asked, and lie down and stay there until they have calmed down again,

whenever they feel troubled about anything, including different household events or noises. And ALWAYS praise and reward them heavily for doing so each time. But in my experience many dogs choose eventually to go to these places themselves when anxious or more mentally 'overloaded', as a source of more immediate sensory relief.

KEEPING CALM

You must begin this 'safe space' training well BEFORE your dog is exposed to things that normally set off their more extreme reactions, because until their responses to going to their 'safe' spaces on command get ever more solid, they will be too stressed to comply with them when exposed to more provocative sensory stimuli at the same time.

The calmer you remain, and the more you train your dog to better discipline their own responses, while simultaneously giving them a set safe place to go to, to mentally decompress, whenever sensory experiences are getting too much for them, the less reactive to these things your collie should get.

Two of the more difficult rooms for collies in most domestic homes are usually the sitting room (because of things like televisions or music, which always sound much louder to a dog) or kitchens (again, louder noises but also a range of more unusual ones). So never try to 'make' a collie stay in these places if they do not want to. Also, when travelling in your car with your dog, do NOT put the radio or music on, as it can be true torture for them, and particularly more sensitive dogs.

It can take time to start hearing, seeing or 'feeling' the sensory world around you like your more sensitive collie does, but only once you do can you then begin helping them better manage it. While also understanding that such issues are part and parcel of real life, every day, for so many of these dogs.

Meanwhile all aspects of sensory sensitivity in Border collies appears in BOOK ONE of my BREED APART trilogy – SECRETS OF THE WORKING MIND. And details on how to create safe spaces for collies and train your dog to have ever better impulse control appears in BOOK TWO – ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILLS & LEARNING. My special SENSORY DETOX programme for collies who might be more chronically stressed/reactive appears in BOOK THREE on BEHAVIOUR: Carol Price collie books: In the UK from: <https://performancedog.co.uk/.../boo.../authors/carol-price/> In the USA from: <https://www.dogwise.com/#> and https://www.cleanrun.com/.../border_collies_a.../index.cfm In Canada from <https://www.4mymerles.com/product-category/books/> In Australia from: <https://gameondogs.com.au/> And in the Netherlands and Belgium from: <https://mediaboek.nl/border-collies-a-breed-apart-book-1...>

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