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Got a collie who won't stop 'buzzing' or indulging in more obsessive, repetitive behaviours? Today our breed expert Carol Price explains why this happens, and what you can do about it

#### **UNDERSTANDING OBSESSIVE HABIT CYCLES IN BORDER COLLIES**

Anyone with much experience of Border collies will know they are a breed prone to more neurotic, or obsessive, patterns of behaviour, commonly revolving around some sensory trigger in their environment. Be this to do with light, noise or movement or - in the case of licking different objects, textures or even themselves! - oral sensation.

So this feature is going to look at how and why this occurs, and why an initial 'experiment' with some kind of sensory experience can later develop into a more full blown obsessive habit in your dog, sometimes to the point where it virtually takes over his or her life.

#### **THE SPEED OF HABIT FORMATION**

One of the things that has long fascinated me about Border collies is the sheer speed with which they can develop, and then ingrain, any new habit or form of behaviour. Which is what makes them so brilliant to train for any kind of new pursuit, or task, but also lies at the heart of why they can develop so many obsessional habits just as quickly, some of which may be less easy to live with within a domestic environment. E.g. light or traffic chasing, more persistent barking, or overly fixating on or attacking household objects that move and/or make a noise - like brooms, mops, vacuum cleaners, lawnmowers or hoses.

Basically what happens is that the dog mounts some kind of initial reaction to a particular sensory stimulus - be it light, movement, noise or something they lick. The reaction then rings a reward bell in the dog's head, in the form of the 'feelgood' hormone, Dopamine. Once this happens the dog will then want to keep repeating the same behaviour again and again, to produce even more Dopamine. And as Dopamine is also the chemical behind all forms of addiction, it is not then long before your dog has developed an increasingly more obsessive new habit.

#### **INCREASING COMPULSION AND OBSESSION**

And the more addictive and obsessive the new habit becomes, the harder you may find it to stop your dog doing it. Dopamine is also a key element behind working drive - or even working obsession/addiction - in sheepdogs. Explaining the dog's willingness to keep repeating the same tasks over and over again, simply for the neurochemical 'high' it gives them, and without there ever being any other kind of more obvious reward to their behaviour

Over time, the point at which your collie becomes excited about specific sensory experiences can also track ever further backwards - to the extent where anything they predict could trigger the sensory experience off again, or more regularly precludes it in some way, is greeted with the same level of obsessive anticipation as the actual stimulus itself.

#### **BREAKING THE CYCLE**

The key to stopping any less desirable obsessive behaviour pattern in your collie is first being far more alert to when any new sensory habit/reaction - of a kind I have just outlined - may be starting in your dog. For too often owners may only start thinking of stopping behaviours like these once they have already become too compulsive and ingrained in their dog's mind.

Or they may initially consider these habits harmless, or even amusing, only to discover later – and usually to their regret - the extent to which they may have more actively let their dog's Obsession Genie out the bottle. A classic example of this being collie puppies allowed or encouraged to chase torch or light beams.

The next thing you have to consider is how you can begin breaking, or interrupting, the habit cycle your dog has developed. Very often this simply revolves around access - in terms of no longer allowing your dog access to places, or things, which prompt more obsessive reactions in them. As all habits rely on constant repetition to keep going.

If your dog gets more obsessive about the hose, or vacuum cleaner, for instance, put them somewhere else while you use them.

## DISTRACTION

Alternatively, or simultaneously, you can begin retraining your dog to react differently to specific stimuli they were formerly getting obsessed with through the use of distraction techniques. Like going and finding a toy instead, or lying on a specific mat or bed instead, and heavily rewarding them for this with treats. So that this then becomes the more preferred future behaviour option.

You are really needing to replace an 'old' habit that became too obsessive in your dog with a newer one that is better for their brain or lowers their arousal levels.

Dogs who more constantly lick themselves, to the point of doing real physical damage to themselves, may have to wear Buster collars until this habit is finally broken.

Keep remembering that the collie brain is always on, and it is thus up to you to keep constantly shaping the kinds of behaviour/habits you want and need your dog to find rewarding, and thus want to keep repeating, and those you would prefer them to stop or discard instead.

## OVER-AROUSAL AND DOWN TIME

A recurring problem in Border collies – and which I have covered before on this page - is also not having their mental arousal levels more constantly monitored and checked, so that they do not spiral more persistently out of control with over-stimulation. This then leads to further problems with dogs getting ever more addicted to the aroused mental state, in itself, and then constantly looking for ways to self-stimulate themselves to maintain it, from different sensory sources in their environment. These self-stimulatory habits may then become increasingly more obsessive in nature.

So it is vital to teach collies not only how to better manage and contain their own arousal levels – via impulse control training – but also that there are times in the day when they must settle and rest. These are both subjects I have covered before on this page, and in more depth in my books. Obsessive habits and activities in Border collies, and how to deal with them, appear particularly in BOOK THREE of my BREED APART trilogy on BEHAVIOUR:

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