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## **THE FEARUL MIND**

Better understanding fear and its fallout in Border collies

It has taken me many, many years of my life to better understand how collies think, and respond to their surrounding world – usually, so very differently to ourselves. And also that in trying to transplant our own human brains, and thought processes, into a collie's head is where so many of our problems with these dogs begin.

Human beings, in the main, can just be so bizarrely inconsistent. In that we will invariably view ourselves as mentally superior to all other animals in every way. Then still expect them to think and react to their surrounding world just like us, whenever some problem crops up for them in their environment. And that includes the experience and sensation of fear. An emotion at the heart of so many more challenging issues in collies.

We often do not understand our dogs' fear, only because we cannot share it or know where it comes from.

## **A DIFFERENT MIND**

Humans process fear or threat according to a pretty complex mental alert system. Involving a wealth of accumulated personal memory and experience; what or who has been proven to be safe or less safe in the past, and what is more novel or unfamiliar in their immediate environment.

Dogs may have the same basic system, but on a far more primal level. They cannot, for instance, rationalise their world like we can; know what a plane is, for instance, and why it exists or what it does, or the true function and purpose of umpteen different noises they get exposed to daily in the home or outside environment.

And they never live long enough to amass the level of social or environmental knowledge we typically acquire in our lifetimes. So they are creatures who primarily have to rely on instinct, instead, to rapidly process what is going on around them. They either trust that something they experience is safe, or they suspect that it is not. And then suitably respond either way.

Sometimes this more 'primal' system in collies – at least to our eyes - doesn't work so efficiently, in terms of what a dog's mind chooses to mount a more fearful response to. I have a dog for instance who doesn't blink an eyelid in heavy traffic, or when a plane screeches over her head, but immediately runs off to hide when you take a loaf of bread out the freezer, because of the 'cracklier' noise it makes. This is the nature of instinct. It

is never going to be 100% accurate in its assessments or responses, but it's all dogs have got.

## THREAT AND FEAR RESPONSES

Collies can vary greatly in how readily they will both perceive or react to any sudden sense of threat – i.e. with a milder or more extreme physical response. Such as freezing (or refusing to budge from a particular spot), fleeing, hiding, barking, whining, lunging out defensively, panting, shaking or shivering. And because all these responses emanate from more primal survival programming in dogs' heads, it can be hard for them to exert any more conscious control over them, or even focus on anything else.

This is also why your dog may seem completely unable to listen to you, or take in any attempt you may make to try to soothe them or calm them down when they are in the height of a fear response, because their brain is now totally locked into survival mode, screening out anything other than what their instincts tell them they must do at that moment.

## FEAR & RECOVERY

Something I have always found highly relevant in a dog is not that they become fearful when suddenly exposed to something newer or more potentially threatening – which, along with natural caution, is in fact a pretty healthy survival response – but how long they take to recover from that fear response once it has been launched.

For some it can be minutes, for others hours or even days. Depending on how quickly the dog decides that the thing they first thought was unsafe is safe, or be trained (of which more later) to accept this. Being prepared to recover quickly from a fear experience is always a good sign in dogs. You will also never get a better chance to turn a fear response in a dog around than the very first time it happens. Rather than long after it has become a far more ingrained behaviour in them, through constant past repetition.

## WHEN FEAR LINGERS

Some dogs have a much bigger struggle overcoming their fears. Either because they have not been given a better chance, or better training, to overcome them or because this is a more intrinsic part of their whole nature, or personality.

If your own dog is like this, there is nothing to be gained from wishing your dog was more 'normal' or able to see their world more like you can or behave like other dogs do. Your dog can only think like your dog thinks, and then behave accordingly.

Dogs like these will always need more help and support in guiding them through the sensory and social minefield of our human world. With the right training – in teaching them to build more positive associations with things they previously once found

frightening – so many of them can be helped and moved on to a happier place, but you can only progress at the speed each individual dog is prepared to go, when it comes to change.

## **MORE OVERWHELMING FEARS**

Mostly the best approach to fearful perceptions and responses in collies is to teach them to feel more positive about the thing, or things, that once frightened them. But I do not think this applies to everything. Sometimes fear triggers are so overwhelming, as well as more scarily unpredictable – as in the case of thunderstorms, say, or fireworks – that finding an immediate place of safety for the dog to go to, or hide in, is a better strategy. Especially if other options – like noise CDs to better familiarise dogs with these sounds – have not worked for you.

Due to the more supreme sensitivity of dogs' hearing, compared to our own, the noise of things like fireworks and thunder can also actually cause them physical pain, and thus it is harder to persuade a dog that something is actually 'safe' when it has this kind of physical effect on them.

The biggest assets you can, ultimately, give any fearful dog are your patience and greater insight into their problem. Fear is not something a dog can help, or always control in themselves. But we can control the ways in which we choose to better understand them, and help them.

Meanwhile, a far more comprehensive look at fear in Border collies, its fallout on their behaviour, and how you can train dogs to be less fearful about different things, appears in BOOK THREE (green cover) of my BORDER COLLIES: A BREED APART trilogy: BEHAVIOUR - INSIGHTS, ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS:

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