

# Both Ends of the Leash

## Action or Angst? Guilt is a lousy treatment plan for behavioral problems

Patricia B. McConnell

Not long ago, I found myself explaining the dark circles under my eyes to a business associate. “My cat got out last night,” I said, “and it took me forever to get her back inside.”

“Oh no!” said the woman, “how humiliating.” Dumbfounded, I stared at her for the longest time, unsure about how to respond to her suggestion that I was humiliated. Humiliation was the last emotion I had felt. Scared? Yes, because I live close to a county highway and have no reason to believe that the cat I adopted from the humane society knows anything about traffic. Frustrated? Yes, because she managed to stay just out of reach for at least 45 minutes. And, to be accurate, I'd better add “pissed off” to the mix – it was raining, it was dark, it was the middle of the night, my nightgown and legs kept getting caught on raspberry thorns and my slippers slid off on the muddy hillside so many times I was functionally barefoot in the rain and thorns and the mud and I really, really wasn't enjoying it.

My fear that I'd never see the cat again and my irritation about an evening gone sour had been so strong that it took me some time to understand why someone would suggest that I was humiliated. But I should have figured it out sooner. Like many people, she apparently assumed that as a certified applied animal behaviorist, with lots of lovely letters after my name, I am professionally embarrassed by any “misbehavior” on the part of my pets. In one sense, she was correct. As I travel around the country doing seminars, I am overwhelmed by the number of trainers, behaviorists and veterinarians who are deeply ashamed of their dog's behavior--whether it's bark-lunging at the dog show, growling at children or urinating on the Oriental rug.

It's not just professionals in the dog world who carry this burden. I can't tell you how many clients come



to my office feeling embarrassed and ashamed that their dog isn't perfect. Many clients haven't told their spouses that they're seeking help, and some even ask us never to call their homes or offices, as though if we did, we'd be exposing them to the tabloids. We keep consultations as private as if they were counseling sessions, because problems with your dog can feel so tender and private that public exposure feels like going to high school naked.

It's easy for me to empathize. Early in my career as a behaviorist, I had a dog who was aggressive toward other dogs. At first, I too felt like I had some dirty little secret in my closet. Here I was, advising others on how to treat and manage their dog's serious behavioral problems, and I had one of my own in the privacy of my own living room. But soon I began to realize that my little Border Collie, Misty – as sweet as Krispy Kremes™ to people and equally hateful to unfamiliar dogs – wasn't an embarrassment, but an opportunity. She taught me more about solving a behavioral problem than any dog I've ever had. She taught me what it feels like to have to work through a treatment plan over not just months, but years, and to manage a problem dog for the rest of her life.

At one point during the most intense phase of Misty's treatment, I was at a doctor's appointment for my own health, and ended up listening to my physician describe his son's serious illness. As he talked about the challenges he was facing, I realized that he and I were in similar positions – both professionals with serious career-related problems in our own homes. It was as if the clouds parted and the angels sang. Here was this brilliant medical doctor, not wallowing in shame because his son was sick, but using his energy

and knowledge to cure him. After all, he didn't make his son sick, and he didn't feel responsible for anything but trying to help him. He helped me realize that I didn't make Misty who she was, and I was wasting my energy feeling guilty about it. Responsible people have dogs with behavioral problems just as physicians have sick children. What matters isn't whether or not you have a perfect dog, it's how you handle problems when they come up.

Ironically (but predictably), it's the most responsible dog guardians who have the most angst about their dog's behavior. Indeed, a touch of angst wouldn't be such a bad thing in those who take no responsibility for their dog's actions. You know the ones I mean – the ones who keep bringing Chief back to the dog park after he's started 27 fights and is looking to start number 28 with your dog.

Perhaps the word “responsible” is the key here. What does being “responsible” for your dog's actions mean? Does it mean that we all live in some doggie equivalent of the Leave It to Beaver show, in which our dogs have only endearing and amusing little problems, easily solved before the commercial break? Does anything else, anything worse, mean that we're bad people – bad humans who should be sent to our respective dog houses without our dinners because “nice” people's dogs simply don't growl or snap or bite or chase motorcycles? It strikes me that a fine line divides acting responsibly and feeling guilty when our animals misbehave, and narrow though it may be, the difference between the two is important.

I'd like to suggest that “responsible” guardians can have dogs with behavioral problems. What makes the people responsible is that they acknowledge their dog's problems, understand when and where they are likely to occur, and do all they can to successfully treat and manage them. That might mean that your dog simply doesn't go to the park, or settles into her crate with a good chew toy when the grand-children come over. That's not necessarily a failure, it's simply an acknowledgment of what you're working with.

Don't misunderstand me. Myriad behavioral problems can be successfully treated; I wouldn't be making a living as a behaviorist if I didn't believe that. I'm not suggesting that you throw your hands up in the air and say, “Well, no dog is perfect” if your

dog is chasing your neighbor's cat. What I am saying is that it won't help your dog if you spend your energy feeling guilty about it rather than treating and managing it. As I said to a client who was overwhelmed with guilt after her dog bit another dog: “Listen, what your dog did wasn't acceptable, and of course you need to work to prevent it from ever happening again, but hey...you didn't bite anyone, did you?”

My serious-problem dog died years ago, and at the moment I'm blessed with some pretty darn good dogs. All four of them are lovely with people of all descriptions, are excellent with other dogs (oh yeah, except Tulip, who has to be introduced “properly” to a new dog...), will stop and lie down even when at a dead run behind a deer (oh yeah, except for that time a few weeks ago when Tulip was chasing a rabbit...), and are invaluable helpers in dog-dog aggression cases. Perfect behavior is a wonderful thing, but there's a downside to everything – and perfect behavior is a bit boring, isn't it? (Tell the truth: Which parts of the sentence did you enjoy reading the most – the parts where my dogs were perfect, or the asides about Tulip's misadventures?)

Some of my favorite stories are those that commemorate the misbehavior of one of my dogs. There was the time my adolescent Great Pyrenees shot out of the house like some albino ballistic missile and ran across the road after a deer, just as a visiting workman said, “Aren't you that famous dog-doctor lady I just read about?” Or the time fifteen years ago, in my first month of working as a behaviorist, when I actually shouted to a client on the phone (who was calling about a barking problem), “I can't hear you because all my dogs are barking. Can I call you back?”

I had to work my tail off to teach Tulip to not chase deer across the road, and I had to spend a few months teaching Luke to stop barking when I said “Enough,” even when a truck the size of an oil tanker pulled up. Am I a bad person because these issues came up? Of course not. Is anyone a bad person because one of his or her dogs has a behavioral problem? Of course not. Just remember, even doctors' kids get sick, even good cars need mechanics and even Tulip gets into trouble sometimes. Don't feel guilty about the problem; that's a waste of energy. Your dog doesn't need your angst, she needs you to find a solution.

Solutions are a lot easier to find if you put down the burden of shame and search out a solution with a lighter heart.

It's okay, honest. You didn't bite anybody, did you?

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