

Both Ends of the Leash

Get Real

Fight frustrations by adjusting your expectations

Patricia B. McConnell

It was week number four of exercise restrictions for Willie, my adolescent Border Collie. “No exercise beyond a slow walk, no jumping up and no playing for six weeks,” said the veterinarian, or else Willie’s injured shoulder may never heal. “Either keep him on a leash or restrict him to crate rest.” Right. “Crate rest” is a phrase used only by someone who has never had a young, high-energy dog. In this fantasy, once inside a crate, a dog’s only alternative is to lie motionless and snooze. The reality is astoundingly different. A dog can, in fact, be phenomenally active inside a small crate. Unless they’re sedated, crated dogs can still flip, spin, leap and thrash; on-leash, they can do the same in the blink of an eye. I had a lot more control of Will when he was on-leash, so when I was home, I spent most of my time attached to a young, healthy, adolescent Border Collie. Who was pretty much not supposed to move.

Will actually did amazingly well. He learned new tricks that gave him lots of mental exercise, and was reinforced for stretching his leg as part of his physical rehabilitation. He lay politely beside me on the living room floor for hours on end in the evenings. Over all, it went surprisingly smoothly. But inevitably, there was a day – a day when I was tired and Willie was full of himself and the two of us were sick of being attached like conjoined twins. Willie couldn’t settle down in his crate, and he couldn’t relax beside me. I didn’t have the energy to teach him a new trick, and it was becoming increasingly clear that neither one of us was having a good time. He was bored. I was exhausted from trying to keep a young dog from doing what young dogs do and worrying that one wrong move would destroy four weeks of hard work.

When my partner, Jim, walked in the door that evening, I quietly said – jaws clenched and lips tight



– “Would you take the spawn of Satan into another room for a few minutes while I poke pencils in my eyes?” I said it calmly, but inside, I was seething with frustration.

Who, on occasion, isn’t frustrated by their dog? Who hasn’t felt words we know we’ll regret gathering like storm clouds in the back of our throats? Isn’t frustration a predictable part of living with others, whether two-legged or four? No matter how wonderful dogs are, there are times in our close relationship with them in which one of us is frustrated by the other. I can’t speak for dogs, but here are some thoughts for us humans about what seems to be a predictable consequence of living together.

Given the inevitability of frustration, it’s a good idea to acknowledge that it happens to everyone. I’d love to see it addressed in puppy classes, and every trainer working one-on-one with clients should talk about it. If it’s just you and your own dog, then perhaps this will help you during the darker moments of the human-animal bond.

I suspect that the most common cause of frustration is unrealistic expectations. The “Lassie syndrome,” trainers call it, after the canine television star who appeared to understand long, compound sentences and never once peed on the rug. Somewhere, sometime, we created in this country a cultural belief that good dogs come with the desire to please above all else, and can read our minds and understand our language. We need to grasp that this is an unrealistic fantasy, because unrealistic expectations, common as they are, lead to anger and frustration. On rare occasions, this can be a good thing – I owe my 15

years of life with Lassie, a very special dog, to a man who adopted her from a shelter and returned her the next morning because she chewed his belt in half while he was at work all day. He thought this was an impossible behavioral problem. I thought she was just being a dog.

Dogs actually do have “minds of their own.” Also good to note: dogs jump up on visitors because they are dogs and are trying to get close to your mouth to greet you properly (not because they haven't accepted you as the “alpha”), they chew on whatever they can until you teach them differently, they fart, they eat poop and kitty litter, and they think walking side-by-side through the neighborhood is boring. Suzanne Hetts, CAAB, said that people shouldn't get a puppy unless they were willing to lose at least one very expensive pair of shoes. Wiser words were never said. Of course, everyone “knows” this, right? Except, too often, we don't.

The anger associated with frustration is often motivated by an inability to influence the world around us. Think about it. If you're like everyone else in the universe, at least sometime in your life, you have gotten angry. What was it about? I don't know about you, but I most often am frustrated when some inanimate object – can you spell computer? – doesn't do what I want it to. I'm just making a wild guess here, but I doubt that I'm alone. Think about placing an order online and getting that annoying little pop-up demand to type in your address when you've already done so a dozen times. Think about a printer that keeps flashing “out of paper,” when the paper tray is full and you're on a deadline and you're late already and it's rush hour and...

People want to influence the behavior of everything around them, including their pets, and often become angry when they can't. An inability to control the behavior of others is the most common cause of domestic abuse, and in my experience, people most often get frustrated with dogs because they can't get them to do something – like coming when called, or they can't get them to stop doing something – like barking at the neighbors. I suspect that's why television shows that wrap up serious behavioral problems in 30 minutes are so satisfying. “Look! Just a few simple tricks and you can get your dog to do anything you want!”

This is where books, articles, trainers and training classes can do so much good. They help us with humane methods to teach dogs to do what we ask, as well as show us how to stop problematic behavior (a less common aspect of dog-training-class curricula). However, even in the best of circumstances, frustration is going to show up on occasion, isn't it? All the better, then, to be prepared for it. The following are some of my favorite coping mechanisms.

Sarcasm. Ah, thank goodness dogs can't speak our language. At least, not much of it. That's why you can say, with a cheerful lilt to your voice, “I hate every hair on your head,” and have your dog wag from the shoulders back and grin at you like a fool. Two caveats here: you really do have to say it in a happy voice, and you need to ensure that the people around you understand you are just teasing.

Deep Breaths. Of course, cheerfully expressing hateful thoughts only works if you are only moderately aggravated. For frustration closer to rage than irritation, try training yourself to stop and take several deep breaths. It may sound trite, but many a relationship has been ruined by words or actions that burst out like floodwater through an old dam, irreparably damaging relationships. Anger management advice always starts with STOP, and then take a few breaths. Anger is a primitive emotion that begs for action, and unless you're under physical attack, action may be the worst possible response.

Laughter. Who said you can't laugh at your dog? A wise friend once counseled me to respond to the absurd directives of a difficult associate by bursting out laughing. Not in a mean, condescending way, but with true amusement and delight at the bizarre ways some people's brains work. This advice has stood me in good stead and, on occasion, I have burst out laughing around my dogs – not always feeling amused, truth be told – in response to garbage strewn on the kitchen floor, or – my personal favorite – to a dog showing up slathered in green, skunky fox poop just as six people arrive for a dinner party. Laughter, even if you are seething as you start to produce it, has an amazing ability to lighten your mood. It allows you to stop and remind yourself that she's a dog, after all, and isn't purposefully trying to make your life more difficult.

Time-Outs. Everyone knows that “time-outs” are just as useful for parents as they are for children, and the same goes for you and your dog. I don't see “time-outs” listed as one of the reasons to crate-train a dog, but as a person who thought she was patient until she had seven dogs in the house, I strongly suggest you either teach your dog to be happy in a crate or in a room with a closed door. Even though I've spent literally decades studying and teaching canine behavior and how to influence it, there are still occasions when I stop, take a breath and immediately follow it with “Crate up!” Later, you can ask yourself why your dog did what she did, and what you can do to prevent it in the future.

Forgiveness. Last, but definitely not least, forgive yourself for the times you aren't exactly who you want to be. Not long ago, I began my day by stepping barefoot into a puddle of diarrhea on the living room rug. It turns out that small circles of brown were everywhere, a three-room extravaganza of liquid poop. I yelled out “S---!” I didn't intend to be so literal but the word did clearly summarize my feelings and provide an accurate description of the problem in one syllable. However, I yelled it, loudly and angrily, and then saw Willie cowering in the kitchen, tongue flicking and big-eyed. I wasn't mad at him, or at Lassie either – how could I be mad at a dog for being sick? I was just mad at having poop on my foot and having to clean three rooms before I even started my day. But my expression of anger scared Willie so much (thankfully, not Lassie, who was mostly deaf) that I felt guilty for raising my voice. That's what I get for having sound-sensitive Border Collies. I'm only human – we all are – and we just need to do the best we can. Willie recovered, I cleaned up the house and life went on. (And while you're at it, don't forget to forgive your dog for her most recent transgression. Your other friends may not chew up your cell phone or roll in cow poop, but they're not perfect either.)

We all have things we feel guilty about, and dogs are great at eliciting that emotion. A famous dog trainer's saying sums it up with crystal clarity: “We train by regret.” We all have things we've done we wish we hadn't, but we learn from them, and if we're smart and committed, we get closer and closer to being the person we want to be. Part of striving to be a great guardian is acknowledging that frustration is a

natural part of any relationship, and that we are all better off if we teach ourselves how to cope with it.

I'm ready. The next time my foot lands in cold, stinky poop, I'm going to laugh like a loon.

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