

SECRET REASONS FOR BEHAVIOR CHANGES IN YOUR DOG

A Call to Action



Uncover What's Bothering Them with a Little Detective Work



Chasing the Wrong Squirrel

One of the most common calls we get as behavior professionals is... "Help! My dog has started X." This could include anything from aggression, fear, startling easily, pacing and whining at night, becoming disoriented in familiar places, to almost anything you can imagine. Of course, there could be a hundred reasons under the sun why a dog has begun displaying a particular behavior.

One of the first things owners and professionals should be looking for, however, is a potential medical cause - more importantly, to eliminate one. When the behavior is something different than you are used to seeing, or contrary to the dog's usual personality/temperament, it is time to whip out the magnifying glass and examine things a little more closely.

Sudden Behavior Changes are Not Normal

Particularly in adult dogs, sudden and dramatic behavior changes with no obvious preceding cause ARE. NOT. NORMAL. This is even more true for our senior pups, just as it is for elderly humans.

Think about the way simply not feeling well can affect your entire outlook on the day. Perhaps you were short with someone when the situation didn't warrant it, or you simply didn't even want to get out of bed in the first place. You might decline activities you usually enjoyed attending, or find that your job performance is starting to suffer from inadequate sleep. Our dogs are no more immune to these behavioral effects from their mental and physical conditions than we are.

In addition to general discomfort, increased agitation and some specific (often chronic) conditions raise a big red flag that it is time for a medical evaluation ASAP - preferably even before calling the trainer:

- ❖ **Allergies** - licking, scratching, overgrooming with hair loss, touch sensitivity to specific locations on the body.
- ❖ **GI issues** - stomach upset, decreased appetite, PICA or eating non-food items, potty training accidents.
- ❖ **Long nails you can hear clicking the floor** - abnormal gait impacts dog's ability to walk, joint pain and structural damage, infections with touch sensitivity to legs/paws.
- ❖ **Dental problems** - decreased appetite and recreational chewing, touch sensitivity to face/head.
- ❖ **Neck and spine misalignment** - touch sensitivity to face/head/neck, reactivity on-leash, reluctance to perform known commands like "sit" or "heel," increased startle response/noise phobia.
- ❖ **Thyroid imbalance** - appetite changes could decrease or escalate to PICA or resource guarding, lack of energy from weight gain/loss.
- ❖ **Joint disorders or acute soft-tissue injuries** - touch-sensitivity to hind end/legs, reluctance to perform known commands like "sit" or "heel," intolerance in play, increased startle response/noise phobia.
- ❖ **Ear infections** - decreased appetite and recreational chewing, touch sensitivity to face/head/neck, reactivity on-leash.
- ❖ **UTI** - potty training accidents, touch sensitivity to abdomen/hind end.

➤ **PRO TIP:** *A reluctance to engage in usual activities like walks or cuddling on the couch are often the first sign of any of the above!*

First Course of Action

If an owner cares enough about their pup to call a trainer, they are usually also keeping up with their dog's annual check-ups at the vet. However, sudden behavioral changes warrant a recent vet examination specifically with that problem in mind. At an initial consult, behavioral professionals may recommend management and stress-reduction tactics for safety, but should want to know the results of the vet exam looking for medical-behavioral causes before implementing extensive and expensive behavior change strategies.

Owners can relay their history and our findings to the vet themselves, or trainers can work directly with the vet to coordinate observations. Diagnostics like a thorough physical exam (potentially under sedation), imaging (like X-rays or ultrasound), a comprehensive blood panel, food elimination trials, pain

management trials (medication/supplements), exercise restriction or physical therapy, even biopsies may all be recommended and required in order to get an accurate diagnosis.

Success Stories

It is incredible what we can accomplish when working as a team. There is nothing quite like that feeling of discovering what's ailing your dog and finding relief for them - we can see it on their faces and reflect the gratitude in our own. It's a big part of why vets and trainers do what we do. Below are a few case studies - examples of times we've uncovered the underlying problem and resolved it with vet consults guiding our training:

- ❖ **Trixie** - *Separation Anxiety* - discovered one extra vertebrae impeding mobility and causing discomfort.
- ❖ **Sadie** - *Separation Anxiety* - extreme allergies made it difficult for her to relax.
- ❖ **Rocco** - *Aggressive Behavior* - slow thyroid caused irritability due to lethargy and hormonal imbalance.
- ❖ **Faith** - *Anxiety & Compulsive Paw-Licking* - excessive licking and grooming attributed to environmental allergies and/or storm phobia; decreased significantly after receiving knee surgery and increasing pain treatment for arthritis (*history of hip dysplasia and noise sensitivity*).
- ❖ **Lydia** - *Anxiety & Compulsive Forelimb-Chewing* - excessive chewing and licking of forelimb attributed to stress/boredom; almost entirely eliminated after treating young, energetic dog for arthritis pain from old fracture (*history of both generalized anxiety and gunshot wound*).

Take Action

As professionals, we want to make the best use of the owner's time and resources. Beginning working on changing behavior may not be the best, first course of action when we don't yet have all of the information. Think of how many truisms which describe how futile this can be - "a bandaid on a bullet hole" and "treating the symptom not the cause," just to name a few.

A behavioral consult should always begin with a thorough history, so that we, as owners and trainers, don't fall into this ineffective, inefficient, "quick-fix" trap. If that history doesn't include a recent visit with your veterinarian specifically examining for potential causes of the behavior issues, consider whether a second opinion from another qualified professional may be the best course of action for you - and your beloved dog. They will thank you!