

Creatures of Habit

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Routines. We love them and hate them. There's no doubt that they save us time, energy and brain-power, but they are also a double-edged sword when it comes to our dogs.

Most of us find that routines of one kind or another mean that we don't have to think too much about behaviours and chains of behaviour that need to occur over and over again. For example, I bet you would have to concentrate to list out what your routine is in the shower, and yet you do this every morning without even a second thought. This sort of pattern of behaviour is useful because deep thought about anything is more taxing on the system, and uses more energy (and I mean real, measureable energy – in terms of calorie consumption) than habits which take almost no thought at all. Ask yourself, what is $2 + 2$? Easy, of course. It pops into your head without even a split second of cognitive brain-power wasted. However, if I ask you to divide 2379 by 41, you might just want to make a coffee, grab a Mars bar, and sit down with pad and pencil. This is because processing is hard work.

Dogs – as we know – are great energy savers. If they can get away with performing behaviours that require no effort, no change in behaviour, then that's what they will do. This is one of the reasons why dogs will continue to perform risky behaviours – such as lunging and barking at other dogs when out on walks – long after the real reason for doing so (which is usually fear) has passed. Once into a routine, it's hard work for them to change.

One of my trainer friends once told me that he preferred never to let his dogs get into any kind of routine – that he would surprise them with the timing of their walks, dinner-time, play sessions and so on at random. He believed that this kept his dogs on their toes – if they were never able to predict what would happen next then they would be more flexible in their behaviour and he wouldn't ever be pestered by a dog that thought he was ten minutes late with his bedtime snack. To be honest, my first thought was not one about canine behaviour. How exhausting it must be for the human in this partnership! In my busy day there would be a very real risk that I'd forget to feed the starving hoards altogether if I (and they) didn't have it fixed in our brains that 6pm equals food time.

However, while routines may help to keep us on the straight and narrow, of all those things we need to get done on a daily basis, they are also the enemy of behaviour change. As anyone who has ever tried to give up smoking, that 'it's 6pm somewhere' glass of wine, or even crossing your hands on the steering wheel, you'll know that habits – whether good or bad – are hard to give up.

For dogs too, routines or habits can cause them to get stuck in a rut of behaviour, and this can happen remarkably quickly for some dogs. I tend to think that most dogs 'get' a pattern of behaviour if it has been repeated between four and forty times.

The number of repetitions needed to establish a new behaviour or the association with a cue will vary with the complexity of the behaviour and the power of the reward on offer. So, ask a dog for a simple sit and offer him a whole juicy sausage, and he'll probably be volunteering the action within four tries. Ask him to lift one hind leg (which is conceptually difficult for most dogs) and you will have to keep at it for much longer. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Herding breeds seem particularly adept at learning and then repeating patterns of behaviour.

I can clearly remember going to see a Border Collie that had a problem with chasing birds in the garden. The dog thought this was great fun, but the owner detested the behaviour because it meant that every time she let the dog out, the dog ploughed down her 300 foot garden and into the stream at the bottom, cheerfully ignoring her vain attempts at recall (and some choice expletives). Based on the fact that the Collie was - well, a Collie - and that it was clearly choosing an occupation suited to a highly-driven herding breed, we decided to teach the dog to go out, have a quick pee, and then look for its ball - thereby re-directing the chase behaviour to something far more appropriate and controllable. The dog obliged in a text-book fashion. Indeed, within four repetitions of his owner prompting the new behaviour, the dog had effectively picked up a new habit, which pretty much solved the problem and made everyone happy. Incidental to this behaviour was the fact that the dog had run back for the ball on the first few occasions via the whirly-gig washing line. This was not a problem in itself, indeed, I commented that it was rather cute that the dog was now 'herding' the post, but even I was surprised that the dog was still 'hooked' on this same behaviour three years later when I went back to see another dog that they had taken on.

It may be a philosophical question, but I have often wondered whether habits are our servants, or whether they make slaves of us instead. There's no doubt that they make our lives easier, but if your dog is caught in the grip of a particularly annoying or destructive habit, and you will know how hard it can be to create an intervention, build a new behaviour which is triggered by the old circumstance, and then get the dog addicted to it. Learning anything new can be difficult, tiring and sometimes frustrating. We need to understand that our dogs are just as likely to experience these feelings as us at the outset of a new way of behaving, especially if the old environmental triggers are still exerting their influence.

It's likely that the influence of habit on your dog's behaviour will be very individual. Some dogs do seem to have a more 'addictive personality' than others - and this is both a blessing and a curse. If yours is the kind to quickly and easily establish patterns of behaviour that can then last a lifetime, you will understand how important it is to only allow them to practise the behaviours that you want them to keep. However, building on their ability to establish routines quickly at last means that your training is likely to 'stick'. After all, 'habit' doesn't have to be a dirty word.