

Training For Courage

By Karen Clouston

...that is the name of a seminar I took with my horse....teaching the rider how to be an effective, confident leader for their horse, and how that in turn instills confidence in a fearful horse. And really, it's the same approach with dogs.

With patience, firmness, control and consistent leadership, a dog (or horse) will begin to look to you for clues as to whether a situation warrants a fearful reaction or not. Once you establish this kind of trust in the dog (that if you say something won't hurt him, then it must be true), he is free to relax and leave the potential worry to you...his leader. The one he looks up to.

There was a really good episode of the Dog Whisperer that illustrated how I approached training with one particular foster. I don't remember the entire episode, but it was about a very fearful dog and how his owner's sympathy toward the dog's emotional state was actually compounding that fear rather than helping the dog to overcome it. For instance, the dog would hide under the owner's desk and wouldn't come out. The owner would talk to the dog in soothing tones and try to draw the dog out. This soothing tone and sympathetic body language the owner used was making the dog believe he must be right to be afraid...because the owner didn't talk or act like everything was ok.

So in comes Cesar Milan. He walks up to the desk like nothing in the world is wrong with the dog, and takes the leash and simply pulls him out from under the desk. He walks the dog around, then allows him to go back under the desk. He repeats this a few times until the dog will simply come out from under the desk with a light tug on the leash.

He (Cesar) didn't stop to negotiate with the dog, or commiserate with him...he just knew it was safe to come out and so he pulled the dog out.

I believe this dog also had issues with tile floors and he dealt with it the same way. He just did it.

I do feel that body language is important. You don't slump your shoulders and tip your head to the dog in a sympathetic manner. You don't stroke the dog when he's fearful...you don't talk in sympathetic tones. You walk and talk and act as if there is nothing to be afraid of.

So with my little fearful foster, I would purposely seek out things he was afraid of. If all can be planned, you start off with things they are just a little afraid of, then work up to the real earth shaking things later. The small stresses, once overcome, give the dog a bit more balance and confidence to withstand facing the big fears.

With my little foster, I noticed a really big change in him in about 16 weeks. We took a group obedience class and I taught him to take his cues from me and to ignore other dogs. He got corrected for approaching other dogs, but then immediately praised for returning

his focus to me. He was lavishly rewarded for the things he did right, but I wasn't afraid to give him a collar correction for the things I couldn't (because I had a plan) tolerate.

Where we took our obedience, they also had some agility equipment and I asked permission to come and work him on those obstacles. The first thing I tried was a catwalk. He had to climb up three barrels of increasing height, and from the tallest barrel (a 55 gallon drum standing on end) he had to walk across a catwalk to another barrel, then descend the other side. It took me 20 minutes to get him across the first time, and he was growling in fear the whole time. I put a loose muzzle on him and I didn't react to the growling. I didn't let him jump off (you have to be extra careful that you either have a spotter or that you can react fast enough to catch the dog when it tries to jump off, and put them back on exactly where they bailed off). I didn't let him quit. It was go across the catwalk or stay there on the second barrel all night long.

Once we got across the first time, he was treated to cheers, treats and all kinds of happy caresses. Then we did it again. And again. He was stressed and he was panting, but he was getting braver every time across. Later on, that was his favorite obstacle...if let loose, he would go up and over it himself...happy and confident.

The next thing was the tunnel. Again...muzzled. I asked a stranger to literally stuff him in one end while I waited at the other. Oh the growling and squirming! We ignored it. Stuffed him in and gave him no option. He went through. Then again, then again until he was going through on his own and confident about it.

Then on to an A frame. This was no obstacle after the catwalk! Up and over he went. Happy that he could depend on me to let him know it was a fun thing to do.

In all cases he was treated with no sympathy, no emotion...just praise for a job well done! All other behavior was ignored.

At home, he was afraid of things...like the push lawnmower. I sat beside the lawnmower while he braced himself at the end of the leash. I kept a gentle pressure on the leash. With each release of pressure he was clicked and treated and asked to try harder. When he was finally up to the lawnmower, he was clicked and treated for looking at it (this can be hard for fearful dog). He was clicked and treated for being brave enough to sniff at it.

The next day, the lawnmower was in a different place...so it was unfamiliar all over again. Dogs don't always generalize from one situation to the next, and even though it was the same lawnmower we conquered the day before, it was all new because...GASP...it had moved! So we did it all over again. I would walk around the property doing obedience with him, and anything we came across that got a reaction from him was a signal to work on his courage. I didn't drag him right up to it...I gave him some time to take it in...to notice that I was not shaken by the lawnmower...that I could sit by it and touch it and not be hurt by it. I gave him time to think. BUT...he was never allowed to quit trying. He couldn't back up...he could only come forward.

There was another episode of the Dog Whisperer where he's working with three Katrina dogs. One of them had crawled back under a bench. Cesar crawled in after him, leaned his head against the dog, let him think about things for a second, then just pulled him out from under there. He said the dog had to learn that he had to come out when asked. If it was me, I would ask (then tell) often.

It all about small stresses, and the theory that "what doesn't kill you (and you have to make sure it won't) makes you stronger. And it does. You go about things in a fair but firm way. It must be. There is no option. You don't get away with being fearful...not even once.

Noise fears (which often the same dogs have) are dealt with in the same way. Small noises first. You keep the dog on leash so they can't leave. You start with a volume the dog will ignore. You praise or click and treat for no reaction. You keep increasing the volume in small increments and keep praising and treating for no reaction. You gradually build the dog's understanding that the sound of the bell on the microwave doesn't mean the sky is falling. With every success come a bit more confidence.

With a dog that is fearful of strangers, you don't push the envelope in quite the same way. You do not make the dog go up to a stranger and accept handling. You teach the dog instead to ignore them. To be relaxed at your side. They don't have to interact with strangers. It may not be safe...and because people are not easily controlled, it means the situation cannot necessarily be tightly controlled...and this kind of confidence building, you need to know, exactly, what will happen.

If you have kids or friends willing to help you teach the dog to ignore them, you can do something like have them lie face down on the ground or sit down and NOT make eye contact with the dog. They should look down at the ground or up at the sky but never should they move or make eye contact with the dog. They are like stone. You instruct them not to move. Don't let the dog stare at them. Don't give them time to think about what you're doing. You can heel the dog past them at whatever distance the dog is comfortable so you can praise them for ignoring the people. You gradually pass closer and closer until you walk the dog right over them (if they are lying down) and the dog won't react fearfully....the strangers are a non-issue to you, so they should be a non-issue to the dog.

In all of this, your demeanor is solid, upright and in charge. You know what you are about to do will not hurt the dog, so don't act like it might. Joyce Miller talks about visualizing what you want. You MUST do this. You must know in your whole being that the dog can do this with your help. The dog will hear/see/feel any lack of confidence in you...if you question the dog's ability to cope, the dog will most certainly question it as well.

When dogs are afraid of stairs in the house, you can do one of two things. You can spend time clicking them for putting a paw on the bottom step, then gradually more and more

steps if the dog is knowledgeable about the clicker and will progress the way you want them to. OR...you can put a flat collar or a harness on the dog, get a good grip on the leash with one hand, and the hand rail with the other, and just WALK UP THE STAIRS with the dog. Oh...the dog will NOT think this is a good idea, and this is where a harness can be handier than a collar because A) they can't back out of it and B) they can't choke and add to the stress...you just simply make the dog go up. They will drag and whine or growl and they will know in their heart of hearts that you are out to murder them, but darn....when you get to the top (and be prepared for them to rush the last two steps or so) they will still be alive! Praise them for recognizing they are still breathing and that they just achieved the unachievable, and then get set to go down. Same thing, only you'll have more leverage. Don't get run over...keep a short leash and tight control. You don't want to teach them to take stairs unsafe...it's a controlled exercise. They must do as you say to do it in order to keep them safe.

Then...when you're at the bottom...big praise. A quick trip outside to pee (stress), then back in and back up the stairs. Do it a few times. Do it every day until they will walk up with a loose leash, yet under control. Yet another obstacle overcome. Yet another trust building exercise. Yet another confidence builder.

You just have to look for the opportunities and work on them wherever you can find them.

Hope this helps! It's lots of food for thought. And I would go buy Cesar's book. It's good.