

How Touch Can Help You and Your Dog

All creatures experience the world via information from the sensory nervous system. One of the key differences between us, humans, and dogs is that we are able to observe ourselves objectively and thus find it easier to make choices about our behaviour. For a dog, his behaviour is completely determined by his reflexive emotional state which is directly linked to his physical state.

Most of us view our emotions as somehow separate from our physical senses. But a closer examination shows that our emotional responses are also physiological responses, it is not possible to experience an emotion without experiencing a physical sensation. For example, when we are afraid we release chemicals that will raise our heart rate, shunt our blood to different areas and tense up our muscles. These and other sensations are what we call fear, without these changes we wouldn't actually be afraid. Although these are internal changes they are also very apparent externally as it is often possible to tell what someone is feeling just by observing their posture and body movements.

The same also applies to our dogs, one external change that we all recognize in a fearful dog is the clamping of its tail under its body.

Viewed in this manner it is possible to see that if an emotional sensation is also physical sensation then a physical sensation can also create an emotion sensation. In the case of the fearful dog, fear will cause it to automatically tense its hindquarters so as to clamp its tail. For the dog the sensation and the action are the same thing therefore it follows that a dog carrying a permanent sensation of tension in its hindquarters will have a permanent low level sense of fearfulness.

The same principle can be applied to humans, for example a person with chronic high blood pressure (a natural physiological response to stress) will tend to feel constantly slightly anxious. Our ability to reason and view ourselves objectively means that we can override our sensations and therefore modify our behaviors. So, although a sufferer of high blood pressure may *feel* anxious he can reduce this sensation by reasoning that there is nothing in his environment to cause this. A dog doesn't have this option and will be at the mercy of his physical and emotional sensations and responses.

Proprioception is the ability to know where our body is in space. The brain receives this information via the sensory nervous system from receptor cells in our muscles and joints. This constant stream of information enables us to coordinate our movements and gives us our sense of balance. Any impairment within this system will result in a loss of body awareness in the affected area and thus a lack of effective motor control. Muscular tension or injury can disrupt the proprioceptive messages reaching the brain, which then creates a negative cycle whereby the lack of sensory information means a loss of body awareness which means uncoordinated movement which exacerbates the injury or original tension.

To go back to the example of the fearful dog with tension in his hindquarters, we can imagine that one reason for the tension may be a minor injury to his leg or his foot, this injury would have damaged some of his sensory cells sending proprioceptive

information to the brain. This disrupts his sense of where his body is in space causing him to move in an unbalanced manner. Left unchecked this distorted body awareness and loss of coordination becomes his norm and a chronic state of tension in the muscles of the hindquarters would develop. This then can affect his emotional state and hence his behavior.

Through observation to identify areas of tension and postural imbalances Tellington Touch uses specific body and ground work exercises to release muscular tension, change postural habits and stimulate the sensory nervous system enhancing proprioception and thus increasing body awareness . An animal with increased body awareness is more coordinated and more balanced.

And a balanced body = a balanced mind.

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