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Most Common Dog Behavior Concerns Debunked By Dr. Dodman (Exclusive Interview)

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One of the most celebrated dog behaviorists, Dr. Nicholas Dodman answers your most common questions on dog behavior. Working with the worst cases of aggression in canines and researching the field of dog behavior and the factors that affect it, Dr. Dodman easily summarizes his lifelong experience in entertaining answers that will surely get you on the right track in training your dog. Read our first exclusive interview and discover plenty of useful things you never heard about before.



Barking Royalty team is happy to share that Dr. Nicholas H. Dodman, one of the world's most noted and celebrated veterinary behaviorists, accepted to have an interview with us and answer some of the most important, behavior-related questions that all dog owners would love to know.

In this interview, Dr. Dodman will tell us more about his long experience with dogs, their most common behavioral issues and the best techniques to deal with them. Expect to discover plenty of very useful advice that might spare you some time and nerves with handling your dog.

Before jumping to the answers, let's try to briefly describe our correspondent's very long and successful biography into several paragraphs.

Dr. Nicholas H. Dodman is a worldwide known veterinary behaviorist. He received a BVMS (DVM) at the Glasgow University Veterinary School in Scotland after which he became a surgical intern. Later on, he received a Diploma in Veterinary Anesthesia, but he eventually continued his career in the field of dog behavior.

Until now he has conducted and participated in numerous studies and researches on dog behavior and dog health behind him, and has wrote multiple books about his experience with pet. Today he is trying to make a difference for dogs in the U.S. with his [Center for Canine Behavior Studies](#) by protecting dogs from euthanasia and educating dog owners about how to treat common behavior issues and approach their dogs properly.

For those that might haven't heard about you, can you tell us a bit about yourself and what is the field of your expertise?

I'm a veterinarian. I graduated in 1970 from the University of Glasgow, Scotland. And my first specialty was surgery/anesthesiology. I got certified in that field, after about 10 years on faculty at the University teaching anesthesia and surgery I left for the United States, and arrived at Tufts Veterinary school near Boston, Massachusetts. I signed up as a veterinary anesthesiologist but it wasn't very long before my Department Chairman cut me enough slack to get involved in a field that I was passionately keen about which is dog behavior.



Dr. Nicholas Dodman, Professor and Section Head and Program Director for Animal Behavior at the Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, photographed at the behavioral studies clinic in North Grafton, Mass. on Nov. 18, 2010 (Kelvin Ma/Tufts University)

So, I studied it and I became board certified in it and founded the behavior clinic at Tufts and worked in it until 2016 with the number of resident trainees in the program and conducted a fair amount of research into animal behaviors both genetics of certain behavioral issues and new treatments. I wrote some books on the root “The Dog That Loved Too Much”, “The Cat Who Cried For Help”, few others in between, and most recently “Pets On The Couch” which amongst the stories is basically my whole life history at Tufts and discussion of every discovery and breakthrough that we ever made.

What are the most common behavioral issues in dogs that you had to deal with in your work experience?

My work experience seeing behavior cases is a little bit skewed in terms what I saw. Because I saw the worst of the worst and really serious problems that had been seen by lots of other people beforehand whether it was trainers or veterinarians. Because of that I would say the most common case that I saw would involve aggression in dogs. The number one issue is aggression, then a fair number of cases of separation anxiety, some have thunderstorm phobia, some of compulsive disorders and some more minor issues that somehow escaped getting fixed by other people.

What kind of methods should they apply in order to treat these issues at least in the beginning?

Well I think the beginning is very simple and I always started out that way asking people several things.

Number one. What kind of exercise do you give your dog?

Because exercise can be the key to solving so many problems right there by itself. And people would say, “Well I put my dog on lead and I walk him around the block twice a day. We probably cover a mile or two.” And I would say that’s just not enough. What you need is more like, depending on the breed, 30 to 60 minutes of aerobic running, cardiovascular activities so that your dog is tired. I go through all the ways that they could possibly do that because some of them hadn’t thought of.

Then **I would discuss diet** and sometimes that can make a huge difference to behavior. And then **I would discuss communication** so they would be talking to their dog in very long, complicated sentences as if they were a human being and to instruct a dog you need far more simple language and sometimes hand signals too because dogs are very good at reading signals. They’re not so good at verbal language but they certainly can read your body postures and signs.



I would discuss how to be a good leader.

Being a good leader means that you own respect. But also, that you’re there to protect the dog. If things aren’t looking so good, they should know they can rely on you. Discuss how to engage fears.

In a large survey we did, we found out that fears are the number one problem in dogs accounting for something like 44 percent of all dogs their owners consider that they have issues related to fear and anxiety. I would tell them how to deal with

those things, how to avoid things their dog really doesn't like. How to desensitize it to things that are desensitizable. And then I would discuss a number of other sort of issues: some specific issues and behavior modification programs and, last but not least, I would discuss healing herbs or medication that can possibly help a dog on its road to success.

What about chokers or other choking collars that some people claim are effective in training dogs? Can this approach help in achieving desired results?

Well. I don't think that you should correct a dog by tugging on its lead attached to for example a choke collar, or a prong collar. That doesn't earn you any respect. If anything, it earns fear. And often makes things worse. It's a punishment-based approach. I think people who instruct on those kind of techniques have set dog training back for 10, 20, 30 years. I think we've moved in a direction of being all positive, reward-based and you can achieve a lot more that way. I have a saying for people who teach chain jerking. That the word jerk actually applies to the people who teach the subject.

Some of them also say that training with chokers or prong collars is necessary for certain dog breeds. Would you agree or no?

I don't agree at all. All dogs can be trained with kindness and reward and, if you know how to do it, it's a very powerful technique which will achieve the ends that you want without ruining the relationship between the owner and the dog.

It doesn't matter about the breed. And as long as the dog is getting enough exercise, is getting a proper diet, has a consistent environment that **you're communicating properly** and you reward and use the correct method you can achieve anything. Except, of course, in case of some genuine medical issues. For instance, we just finished a study in which we found that quite a large percentage of dogs that had issues were eventually found to have some underlying medical cause and you need to be able to find out what that is and correct it. And there's several that can feature there and there are also some sort of deeply psychological issues that might have a genetic root for example compulsive disorders.

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So, if your dog has a repetitive disorder to the point of the exclusion of regular life that sometimes can mean your dog maybe needs more than just exercise, diet, kindness, reward. They may need medication for that.

And since you mentioned that exercise and diet are very important for a dog's behavior, what are some other ways, except for exercise, that can keep a dog mentally stimulated?

A decent social life is important, meeting other dogs and people and having a fulfilling life. Dogs are not like a mow machine to be used and parked. They really need a proper enriched environment both inside the home and outside.

So, outside when you're doing exercise, you can do what I do with my own dog (I practice what I preach). I go to a place where there are other dogs and I allowed him to socialize and to be a dog and exchange dog messages with other dogs. Because I am relaxed about it and he's relaxed about it, the only issue could be with another dog whose owner hasn't treated the dog like me. But both me and my dog are pretty good readers of that kind of dog and we just give them a wide berth. And that's only very few dogs, most of them are just fine.

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Inside the house we have phones and computers and couches and televisions, nothing really super Dog Friendly. So, there are ways of keeping them engaged and entertained in the home. Even when you're not there.

What would you suggest to our readers that have to work away from home and leave their dogs alone for a couple of hours? What are the ways they can keep their dogs busy while they're away?

The way to think about that is that you need to **find ways of appealing to all of their senses**. They need some things to envision, they need something to look at. So, this might be a room with a view then maybe you can give them a couch with access or some sort of platform they've got access looking out of the window to see people going by. Possibly, if you're on a ground level you can arrange to put out a bird feeder. There'll be birds flying in and out. There'll be squirrels where there's birds. There'll be stuff going on outside they can look at.

Inside the house, regular TV with the sound turned down put onto an Animal Channel is helpful. There is something called Dog TV also that I was partly involved in developing which has the images of other dogs playing on beaches and interacting and chasing balls and a lot of dogs do look at those images.

Moving onto the sense of hearing there are sounds a soundtrack of for example calming so-called bioacoustic music which is designed to calm dogs down and there's an entertainment section on Dog TV too which is more to brighten them up. So, there's more relaxation than there is entertainment, but either way it's a good mix.

Then, you can appeal to their sense of smell by simply hiding **food treats** around the house that they got to track down and that gives them something to do. You can give them long-lasting food

treats which is appealing to sense of smell and taste. So, we've got vision, hearing, taste, smell and touch as the fifth sense. But out of all, the sense of smell is pretty important.

You need to find ways of appealing to all of their senses. They need something to look at, something to smell, taste, hear and touch. But out of all, the sense of smell is pretty important.

You can do novel things like for example you can buy hunting lures on hunting websites which are basically the essence of those animals. I don't like to go to these sites because I don't like hunting but if you go to a site for sportsmen you could often find an array of aromas ranging from deer to rabbits to birds and pheasants and stuff and you can put a little piece of that on a safe chew toy and rotate it around so one day there's one smell, the other there's another smell and that can really keep them interested because sense of smell is the number one sense for a dog.

What about adopted dogs that might have had a trauma in their lives? Should these dog owners try dealing with the dog by themselves or should they find a professional dog trainer that will help calm the dog and readjust him to new rules?

A lot of times dogs have been in a tough situation such as **being adopted from a shelter** or maybe bounced from home to home. Sure enough, when they come into your, hopefully caring, home they can be pretty frightened, anxious to start with, skittish and avoiding things, backing away, hiding. But you can do so much with just patience. So, if you try very gently to get them to exercise, increasing day by day where they go what they do making it a positive experience you put them on a regular schedule. You feed them meals, which they may not have had. You reward them for good behaviors.



It does take time. Most seriously damaged dogs can take a whole year to come around but they will come around with kindness and patience. If you really don't understand how to do it and need a bit of guidance, a dog trainer who uses only positive methods could provide some sort of moral support and some helpful advice going forward. But with those fearful dogs the real motto is that you can't force it.

You have to wait. You have to wait for it to open. You can't force the petals of a flower to open you just have to keep watering them. If there's sunlight and eventually they open and that's what happens to these dysfunctional dogs.

I'm very interested in those dogs. As I said earlier on, the beginning of my career was surgery and anesthesia which set me up pretty well for the second phase of my life which was and still has somewhat to do

with animal behavior and consultations and trying to put people on the right track. The last third of my life is going to be directed to animal welfare, trying to keep animals, dogs and cats out of shelters and trying to make sure that they have a home for life.

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So, I'm trying really to pay back and do something on a grander scale than one on one, trying to make differences through education to make sure owners understand themselves, and their dogs, and what their dogs need, and if there's a problem where they can go. I'm doing that through a group I work with on a website drdodman.org.

You can see on the website what we're trying to do. Your readers can learn about the studies we're doing and there's a newsletter and information and even a sort of Questions and Answers section. Unfortunately, we can't answer everyone's questions, but we pick up interesting ones and answer them on the site.

We'll be happy to share your website's link with our audience. The information you share there will surely be of great help for plenty of dog owners. But let's get back to a question a lot of our readers ask: What are the most basic commands that each dog should know?

Well there's a few that can keep them out of trouble. If they will sit when instructed to sit, which is very elementary and is an easy thing to teach. If they will listen to you and sit when cued to sit, that can get them out a lot of a lot of trouble. So, if your dog is going forward and you could turn to him and say "Sit". If he sits right down and he's not moving forward and he's not getting into the trouble that is in front. Another command that's useful is "Wait".

So, if you're going towards the side of a busy street, to save jerking on the collar, you simply teach "Wait".

And if I say "Wait" to my dog, he just puts the brakes on and he just stops. There's not any tension on a collar or a lead. When he's off leash, a good command too is "Leave it". Maybe there's something disgusting on the side of the street, such as a dead animal or something, and he walks towards it smelling this horrible aroma and I say "Leave it". And these command words are really pretty short. My dog's named Rusty. So, I wouldn't say "Rusty, you've got to leave that thing alone, it's bad." Just – "Leave it". And then the minute he turns his head the other way I say "Good boy. Thank you."

There's only four steps in all dog training and you can use any words you want to, in any language you want to. The first is that you say the command. The third is that he follows that

command. And the fourth is you praise and reward him generously. So, the tough one which I missed out is number two and that is “How you make it happen”.

For example, if you wanted to teach a dog to be quiet, which some people might find useful if their dog is annoying neighbors or some such. The way you teach quiet is, first of all, you make him bark. An easy way to do that is oftentimes to ring the doorbell. So, you ring the doorbell, he barks, you say “Quiet!” or “Stop!” or whatever word you choose and then there’s several ways that you can achieve number two. You could just wait yourself, just do nothing. Make like a tree and just stand there all barking will stop eventually. Even the most serious barkers will stop. When they stop for three seconds, that’s what you asked them to do. Then you jump to four which is praise “Good boy. Thank you.”

Rusty – Dr. Dodman’s Dog

And especially if there’s a delicious food reward involved, they will get quicker at responding. It’s a slow process to start with. But again, it’s patience, it’s understanding and you’re really teaching communication. So, there’s just a handful of commands that will get your dog out of trouble and keep you out of trouble.

Another one, of course, is “Come here” or “Come”. And that’s the only command really where I would use three words.

So, if my dog was wandering off a little bit further away than I wanted him to on an off leash walk.

Here’s the three words I would say “Rusty. Come. Good boy.” His name means you’re talking to him. And then the command “Come” is the action word. And then as the only command where you praise them before they come “Good boy”, so they know they’re not in trouble.

And mine will come even if he’s chasing deer.

I can shout “Wait” and he hesitates. And then I can say “Rusty. Come here. Good boy.” and then he turns around and comes back. That gets him out of trouble too if he’s getting into stuff. You can tell him to wait. But then you want the recall, and that’s “Come”. So, **most basic ones** would be “Sit”, “Down”, “Wait”, “Leave it”, “Come here”. Those be the five basic ones but you can teach your dog hundreds of words.

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Last night I had a new revelation. I hadn’t really taught him this but he was sitting chewing on a particular toy and it wasn’t his favorite toy. His favorite toy is something called Squirrel and it

squeaks. He was just lying on the mat. I just looked at them and said, “Rusty!” and he looks up at me. I said “Where’s squirrel?”

And he lifted his head. He looked to the left. He looked to the right. He looked under the couch thinking he must be somewhere else. So, then he stood up he went across the room and he went to the bedroom where he remembered he left squirrel, got squirrel and brought him back.

He got a reward for that because that was the correct identification of a squirrel.

And I know there are dogs who can identify many more things than just squirrel but I haven’t really taught him that because it hasn’t been particularly useful to me. He’s just sort of picked that up on the run because I do talk to him in single words all the time. So, if I say the word heron, he knows what a heron is. He knows what it’s like. In fact, he knows probably about 20 different species and animals by name because I always called them by the right name and I always say the word singly and he knows what to look for.

So, we have a lot of fun and his linguistic skills are pretty amazing and anybody can do that.

I think a Border Collie was shown scientifically to understand 200 words. There was a German dog called Diesel whose owner said she stopped counting when she got to 350 and he knew more than that. I had an interview with a competition dog trainer. Her dog was more like a circus dog and knew seven or eight hundred words and more recently there was a publication that said that a particular dog knew more than a thousand words.

Dogs should not be limited to “Sit”, “Down”, “Come”, “Stay”, “Leave it”, “Wait”. These are just action words to keep him out of trouble. I think it is worth to teach one new word per month, or even per week. You would soon find you had a dog with a large vocabulary.

If you could sum up dogs and their personality in one sentence how would you describe them.

Almost Human. Some people know that there was a movement in science that you weren’t supposed to interpret your dog’s behavior other than the most basic ways, that to ascribe any human emotions to them was what they call anthropomorphic, unrealistic owners were delusional, in thinking their dogs were showing sympathy in a tough situation or were expressing joy or were laughing or smiling or anything like that. And more and more in science it’s being shown that there’s far more to a dog than just a reflex automaton-like machine who’s good to be petted and you feed him and he goes on walks. They’re far more than that.

So, in a word (or two) almost human. I exaggerate to make a point because they’re clearly not human, they’re canine. But their brains work very similarly to our own, have very similar structure, have the same centers, have the same neurotransmitters and make the same connections. Recently, **studies have shown** at Emory University in Atlanta that using MRI

studies, in certain areas the brain lights up just the same as they do in people when for example they see their owner petting another dog. They show signs that indicate they feel jealousy. They've been studies that said that they didn't feel guilt.

Dogs are almost human. If you treat them with respect, almost like a person, really, you end up with a very fine dog and one who adores you and you adore them. That's the right dog to have, not one that you jerk on a chain that cowers when he sees you because he knows you're carrying the whip.

Now it's quite clear that they can feel guilty. And these are secondary emotions which were thought not to be experienced by dogs. In many ways, other than the fact that they walk on fours, and they've got a fur suit, they're almost human.

And I think that if you treat them with respect, almost like a person, really, you end up with a very fine dog and one who adores you and you adore them. The one they trust you and you trust them, and they'll do everything to know, they would almost literally die for you. That's the right dog to have, not one that you jerk on a chain that cowers when he sees you because he knows you're carrying the whip.