



Well, my heavens, who would have thought that our lives would have taken such a drastic turn in such a short period of time? Not only has the COVID-19 virus affected our entire country, with dosed borders and communities, but the rest of the world is on lockdown as well. During the past few weeks in self-isolation, I have spent my time taking Michael Shikashio's "Aggression in Dogs" Master Course. It was time well spent and a perfect opportunity while hunkering down at home.

As I was taking this course, watching the videos and case studies, I was reminded of our Fall APDT 2019 conference in Portland, Oregon. Temple Grandin, Ph.D., was the guest speaker, and for those of you who were in attendance, she made a comment about the "new normal." I am not sure if it was in reference to aggression cases specifically, but my take was what level of behavior do we find acceptable, what is not acceptable, and when and where do we stop lowering the bar for acceptable behavior(s)?

This pandemic has shown how subtly a new normal can seep into our lives. Before we know it, rationalization or a singular focus can change our perspective, subtly changing our boundaries and expectations. We hope. We want to fix. We want to justify. We rationalize. But we must rely on the more intellectual side of our brain, the thinking, concrete, and scientific. We must be careful not to accept the unacceptable. This

slip to a lower level of functioning or acceptance of questionable or even overtly negative behavior.

During the 2019 conference, a trainer was discussing a dog-human aggression case. After several successful training sessions, the dog was responding appropriately to the behavior modification protocol and everyone was thrilled with this positive progress. However, after a few more "successful" sessions, he bit a child. The trainer tempered the dog's transgression, explaining it was not a serious bite, only a minor one. I still had Dr. Grandin's phrase of "new normal" in my head, and this statement particularly struck a negative chord. Did I hear what the speaker just said? Did they hear themselves? Really? Is this the new normal? Where was the plan for an immediate reevaluation regarding safety and management and an overall risk assessment of the dog as a whole and specifically the behavior modification protocol? Are we so use to

Working with aggression cases is a much needed and sought-after expertise. For those who work these cases, bless them for the help they are giving to the dog and the humans; both are hurting emotionally and some physically. But isn't there sometimes a point of no return? Don't we have to ask ourselves what is the ultimate goal? As Michael Shikashio states over and over, safety and management are the top criteria and the first and last thing we strive for in working an aggression case. Let's hope that we don't get so focused on "fixing it" that we lose our perspective.

"Trainers should be cautious about backsliding on bite behavior"

I remember veteran dog trainer Sue Sternberg saying in a seminar that we should be adopting out pets, not predators. We must keep our eye on not just working on the problem behavior but on what we want as the end result. What are the odds of an aggressive behavior occurring even with the best of training? If it means lifetime management by a family who really is not capable of restrictions that affect the dog's quality of life to keep the family and community safe, perhaps the question is already answered. Humans have a great capacity for compassion and rationalization. We must learn to distinguish between the two.

New normals come in a variety of ways. Today's new normal with an infectious disease was abrupt and acute. Due to a pandemic, everyone was intensely aware that our lives had changed, if not permanently, then certainly for the foreseeable future—hence the rash of remote training seminars for all of us who are home bound. I am so thankful and appreciative these webinars were offered. They became a positive part of adjusting to my new normal. These professionals stepped up to the plate and offered immediate assistance and guidance for so many other professionals.

But some new normals are more gradual. When we are working aggression cases, the boundaries and expectations of acceptable behaviors over time can become blurred. We can become so oriented to fixing the behavior that we may lose sight of the whole picture. We may become so emotionally involved in the client's or the dog's struggle that we lose our objectivity or professional judgment. Our training has taught us to deal with facts: antecedents, behavior, and consequences. Don't do your client or the dog a disservice by losing your objectivity. You must wear your professional hat at all times, especially in cases as serious as aggression. Due to this pandemic, dog training and behavior consulting have been and will be drastically changed as well as the rest of the dog world; conferences, competitions, and

conformation dog shows have taken a critical hit, being cancelled until further notice. As our lives change, let us be very conscious of how a new normal can affect us and how we choose to respond.

In working aggression cases, ask yourself what are your long-term goals for the dog, its family, and the community at large? Can the outcome of this case be consistent with those goals as well as these: safety and management and pets not predators? As the old country song "The Gambler" goes, "know when to hold them, know when to fold them, and know when to walk away." As we branch out into remote training with so many trainers and behavior consultants working aggression cases, let us keep these long-term goals and their application in the forefront of our minds. Can you stay cognizant of the entirety of the problem presented and not just focus on modifying a specific behavior? Can you stay objective and not let your emotions cloud your judgment of the case overall? Being mindful that if we become too focused on the incremental successes, we might lose sight of the dog's overall risk assessment.

As we adjust to the new normal, be it acute like living our lives in a pandemic or a more subtle one like working aggression cases, focusing on our goal can help keep us from getting caught in the unproductive and at times unrealistic emotions of rationalization.

Focusing on realistic boundaries and goals and being willing to be flexible and creative enough to make these adjustments can keep us from straying into the murky waters of being slowly conditioned to accept a less-than-ideal behavior or set of circumstances. Be it in our daily lives or working with dogs, we can make our new normal one of high standards and boundaries and maintain the judgment to know what we can and cannot change.



The last few weeks was Shikashio's Aggression webinar. Next will be several remote training webinars. What will be next? I don't know...I'm still adjusting to my new normal!

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