

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

**Proper Diagnosis, Correct Terminology Essential
When Assessing Canine Mental Health Issues**



By Melissa McMath Hatfield, M.S., CBCC-KA, CDBC

Mental health issues such as fear, anxiety, aggression, phobia, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors are dealt with on a regular basis by trainers, behavior consultants, rescues, and shelters. It is critical for professionals to use the correct terminology when discussing a dog and its behavior. Accurate terminology to describe a behavior provides the avenue for effective communication and treatment.

The term “mental health” is appropriate, because we are discussing the dog’s emotional state. The same terms we use for humans to describe an emotion can also be used to describe the dogs. One reason is that we have no other language or term specific for the dog, e.g., fear, anxiety, or aggression. There are multiple terms that are universally understood whether describing an emotional state in a human or dog such as: depressed, afraid, nervous, or happy. These terms are similar in their definitions and descriptions and can be appropriately applied to both species. Everyone can understand their meanings, be it with a human or a dog’s behavior. The problem, of course, is that a human can “tell” us how they feel; a dog can only “show” us. As animal science professor, Temple Grandin teaches us, overt behavior is indicative of the internal state. We must learn to listen with our eyes.

Science has provided us with reliable research and insight proving that dogs not only experience the same core emotions that humans experience, but they are able to think, and problem solve as well. The old theory they just respond to stimuli should be gone forever.

Recent MRI studies have confirmed that the dog’s brain structure enables them to experience the same core emotions as that of a two-and-one-half-year-old child, so we should feel comfortable using terms interchangeably for both the human and the dog. Research has shown us that dogs and humans have the same hormones and chemical changes when they experience similar emotions. For example, the hormone, oxytocin, is involved with feeling love, affection for others, and bonding. Stanley Coran, Ph.D., an expert on dog-human interaction, states that dogs have “the same neurology and chemistry that people have, so it seems reasonable to suggest that dogs also have emotions that are similar to ours.” However, this should be done with caution. This new scientific knowledge provides a productive but generic means of communication, while keeping in mind that, although some basic similarities exist, there are still inherent complex differences.

According to Dr. Coran, the dog’s emotions progress in a developmental sequence just like the human up to the age of two and half years old. This developmental sequence stops when it reaches the complex emotions such as shame, pride, and guilt. These start from birth and develop up to the fourth and sixth month:



Understanding terminology part of correct diagnosis

Listed below are some common diagnoses that mean very different emotional states and are often used interchangeably and incorrectly. This is a common problem among professionals. A correct diagnosis is imperative, so an appropriate treatment plan can be developed. Understanding the difference in terminology and applying them appropriately is critical. A treatment or training protocol is only as good as the diagnoses.

Temperament vs. Personality

Temperament is innate, inherited and cannot be learned. It can be described as a natural instinct, or how a dog reacts to its environment, whether it is confident, aggressive or fearful. Temperament is exhibited early in the developmental stages and tends to remain the same throughout life.

Personality reflects learning from exposure to a variety of situations starting early in life and continuing into adulthood. It can be influenced and manipulated by education, socialization and experience. In a puppy, early, consistent and positive training plays a major role in the development of the individual's personality and equally formative is incorrect or lack of training.

For dogs, personality traits such as extroversion, agreeableness, and openness to new experiences are hallmarks of a

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companion animal. There are some dogs who will never be the social butterfly or the docile and laid-back family pet. For example, the Border Collie begins its life with innate behaviors that are generally active, quick and alert, behaviors required for it to perform the job it was hardwired to do — herd. In contrast, the Pekinese was bred to be a lap dog, and has both the temperament and personality as a companion animal.

Temperament is the foundation, what you start with in life; personality is the result of living that life.

Sociability vs. Socialized

A socialized dog may not necessarily be "sociable" and a "social dog" make not necessarily be socialized. According to Sue Sternberg, **sociable** is "the dog's innate affection for, reference and attraction toward humans," and **socialized** refers "to the dog's early exposure to novel stimuli." For example, a common scenario is grandmother's Toy Poodle that has been socialized from day one, but who is not social with anyone else—socialized, but not social. In contrast, the lone Beagle picked up off the back 40 by animal control may never have been in a car, but he licks the officer grinning all the way to the shelter—social, but not socialized. But of course, you must have the correct temperament to begin with. Socialization builds on and from temperament.

Arousal/Reactivity vs. Aggression

A generally accepted definition of **arousal** is "a state of heightened physiological activity," or a state of active attentiveness. Arousal is responsible for the fight-or-flight

response. The medical definition of arousal is a state of physiological alertness and readiness for action.

In her blog "Understanding Canine Arousal," Dr. Emma Hughes (March 3, 2018/Canine Arousal) means that when individuals are exposed to a high level of sensory stimulation, their brains are flooded with excitatory chemicals, such as adrenaline and cortisol.

In evolutionary terms, this is important as it regulates consciousness, attention and information process, all of which are vital in helping individuals stay safe.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines **reactivity** as "readily responsive to a stimulus" and "occurring as a result of stress or emotional upset." The key phrase being stress or an emotional

upset, the police dog or herding dog can be aroused, but not reactive.

Aggression is the expression of anger: hostile or violent behavior or attitudes toward another; readiness to attack or confront.

As defined by animal behaviorist Roger Abrantes, aggression is ("Aggressive Behavior—the Making of a Definition," Ethology Institute Cambridge) "behavior directed toward the elimination of competition from an opponent, by injuring it, inflicting it pain, or giving it a reliable warning of such impending consequences if it takes no evasive action. It is distinguishable from dominant behavior in as much as the latter does not include harmful behaviors though it may require some degree of forceful measures. Aggressive behavior ranges from reliable warnings of impending damaging behavior such as growling, roaring, and stamping, to injurious behaviors such as biting, staging, and kicking. Predatory behavior is not aggressive behavior."

Fear vs. Anxiety

These are often used interchangeable and generate similar physiological responses, but the cause for these similar biological changes are different. **Anxiety** is an apprehensive anticipation of a future event. **Fear** is an apprehensive response associated with a specific event at the time the event occurs. ("The Difference Between Fear and Anxiety in Dogs, (June 1, 2016/DogDiscoveries.com). A common reaction for a dog when confronted by a fearful stimulus is to run away. When they are prevented from running they have two remaining responses: freeze or fight. Fear and anger are two distinct emotions: "A dog cannot respond fearfully and aggressively at the same time. A choice has to be made in the animal's mind; the dog must change strategies and choose between retreat and charge." ("Fear Biters, The Insecure Aggressive Dogs," by Gaby Dufresne-Cyr, CBT;

dogueshop.com, March 21, 2016). Dogs can be dominant without being aggressive. Submissive dogs can display fear, aggression or inhibition; however, canines simply cannot display fear and aggression simultaneously.

Acceptance vs. Submission:

Acceptance is a voluntarily response where **submission** is involuntary. Is the dog complying voluntarily or is he being forced, cajoled or commanded with no option but to obey? Be sensitive to the motive of compliance. The result can be the same but the motives for the compliance are opposite.

Shyness vs. Lack of Confidence:

Shyness in dogs is considered innate and is the overt result of the dog's temperament. Lack of confidence is due to a lack of experience, training and or exposure to certain stimuli or environments. It can be a result of a lack of socialization or abuse and neglect. A traumatic event or something that generally or specifically caused stress or anxiety could be the cause. The difference is that shyness is genetic and cannot be altered, lack of confidence can be slowly rehabilitated. However, if you are starting with an inherently shy dog with a lack of confidence, you have your work cut out!

Separation Anxiety vs. Isolation Distress

The result of isolation distress or separation anxiety may be the same, i.e., a distressed dog, torn up couch, or potty accidents, but the treatment is different because the cause is different. **Isolation Distress** is a diagnosis for a dog that just does not cope well when left alone. **Separation Anxiety** is a dog that becomes anxious when a specific individual leaves, not just from the act of being left. Be sure you have literally assessed the dog when alone and without his significant other. You will be surprised how quick and informative this test is. The dog will tell you, you just have to listen.

The diagnosis and treatments vary between these very different emotional states. Author Steven Lindsay has an excellent book, "*Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training, Volume Two*." If you are working with dogs in any capacity, you should have an applied understanding of the ethology and assessment of behavior problems and terminology.

A Personality Profile is one of many tools that can aide the consultant, trainer or shelter in making a diagnosis. I have developed one that is a quick "please circle" (on a scale of 1-10; 1 being the least and 10 the most) and can easily be administered by a volunteer or non-professional. It gives the evaluator or trainer a "birds eye view" of the emotional functioning of the dog in his everyday life, i.e., his mental health. In a nut shell the profile quickly tells if the dog is reactive, anxious, anti-social, social, dominant, submissive, confident, shy, hyperactive, aggressive toward other dogs, aggressive towards humans, fearful, resource guards, and demanding.

Along with the term "mental health," temperament is still an appropriate word to use when describing a dog's behavior and reaction to his environment in general. As helpful as the Personality Profile is, the first step is an overall evaluation or function analysis. Temperament assessments and behavior evaluations both are necessary tools in reaching an appropriate diagnosis. A behavior modification protocol or training plan will only be effective if there has been a correct assessment. An incorrect diagnosis or the use of incorrect terminology will result in a failed rehabilitation.

SUMMARY

The goal is to make sure all terms have been "operationally defined." If we understand the definition of the diagnoses and the behaviors that support it, this will assure that everyone is on the same page. For example, one person may say a dog is fearful, but the correct diagnosis is anxiety, two very different emotional and physiological states requiring two different training or behavior modification protocols. Remember, the description of the observable behavior is, in reality, describing the internal emotional state, hence the dog's "mental health."



Melissa McMath Hatfield, M.S., CBCC-KA, CDBC, earned a master's in counseling psychology and is a retired licensed psychological examiner. Her mission is to enhance the human-dog relationship through understanding, knowledge and empathy. Currently she has a private behavior consulting practice where her main focus is performing temperament assessments and behavior evaluations of dogs who are exhibiting mental health issues. For further information please go to her website: www.lovingdogs.net.

Resources

Stanly Coran
<http://moderndogmagazine.com/articles/which-emotions-do-dogs-actually-experience/32883>

Difference Between Temperament and Personality |
 Difference Between <http://www.differencebetween.net/language/words-language/difference-between-temperament-and-personality/#ixzz5JTHLPkMk>