

## These Actions Can Emotionally Scar Your Dog for Life

Depending on a dog's age at the time of this trauma - or even innocent mistakes - it can take a long time, or even a lifetime to recover. They may show their fearfulness in any of these 8 ways. But here are 5 great ways to provide safety and reverse the damage.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent study revealed there are differences in the behavior and psychology of abused dogs and dogs that have never been victimized
- Abused dogs display higher levels of several behavioral characteristics that are common reasons people give for relinquishing their pet to a shelter, including hyperactivity and aggression toward unfamiliar people and dogs
- Canine abuse can take many forms, both active and passive
- Abused dogs can be rehabilitated, but it's important not to expect too much, too soon

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Recently a team at Best Friends Animal Society in Kanab, Utah published the results of a study of the behaviors and psychology of dogs that have been abused.<sup>1</sup> As you might guess or already assume, there are indeed differences between abused dogs and "normal" dogs.

### How Dogs Were Selected for the Study on Abuse

The research team identified abused dogs for the study using a multi-step process. First they notified Best Friends magazine recipients that they were looking for owners of dogs who suspected their pet had been abused. They received over 1,100 responses, and each respondent was given a link to an online survey to complete.

Of the completed surveys, 149 were chosen based on the researchers' assessment that the dogs involved were more likely than not to have been abused.

The next step was to give five experts the histories and physical reports of injuries of the 149 dogs. After evaluating each dog, if four of the five experts concluded the dog had probably been abused, the animal was included in the study. This final step narrowed the field to 69 dogs.

The guardians of the 69 dogs then had to complete a highly detailed survey called the Canine Behavioral Assessment and Research Questionnaire (C-BARQ). The questionnaire is designed to measure a number of different canine behavioral characteristics, and is considered by many to be the gold standard research tool for the study of dog behavior.

The 69 study dogs were compared with over 5,000 dogs in the C-BARQ database that were similar in age, the age they were acquired by their current owners, and their living situation at the time they were acquired.

## **Abused Dogs Are More Likely to Exhibit Certain Behaviors**

According to the researchers, the dogs in the study displayed higher levels of 12 behavioral characteristics, 8 of which are known to be among the most common reasons people relinquish their dogs to animal shelters. These 8 traits and behaviors include:

- Excitability
- Fearful on stairs
- Attachment, attention-seeking
- Hyperactivity
- Rolling in feces
- Persistent barking
- Fear and aggression toward strange people and dogs
- Bizarre, strange, or repetitive behaviors such as hoarding, digging deep holes, compulsive sucking on pillows, and circling

Numerous studies show that fearfulness towards unfamiliar humans and dogs is closely coupled with aggression toward them. These study results provide further evidence that aggression in dogs, especially abused dogs, is often motivated by fear.

The researchers also theorize that abuse causes fear, and fear leads to aggression as a conditioned response. However, aggression can also be the result of a genetic tendency, poor or inadequate socialization, a brain injury, and any injury that causes aggression as a response to pain.

## **Some Behaviors Can Be Both a Result and Risk Factor for Abuse**

In most cases of abuse, there is little information about a dog's personality and behavior before the abuse occurred, and this was true for the dogs in the Best Friends study.

The researchers also cautioned that the differences they evaluated between abused and other dogs don't mean the abuse caused the differences. Further, it's possible that certain canine behaviors are risk factors for abuse, meaning dogs with those behaviors are more often abused.

The Best Friends researchers would like future studies to look at which behavioral differences are caused by abuse, which are risk factors for abuse, and which are both. For example, persistent barking can be the result of abuse and can also increase the likelihood a dog will be abused.

The team would also like to learn more about which types of abuse are most damaging and hardest to recover from, and whether the age at which a dog is abused affects the outcome.

## Examples of Abuse

Abuse of a dog can be active in the form of physical attacks or punishment. It can also be passive, for example, neglect. Abuse wears many different faces, including:

- Depriving a young dog of its mother through too-early weaning
- Chaining or tying up a dog; forcing him to spend most of his time in a kennel or cage; making him live outside, away from his human family
- Yelling, hitting, or other forms of verbal or physical punishment; causing chronic stress or pain
- Lack of proper care in feeding, grooming, and attending to health needs
- Partial or complete social isolation; lack of appropriate learning experiences

Depending on how old a dog is when the abuse occurs, it can affect him for the rest of his life, even if he escapes his abuser and is adopted into a loving home.

## Creating a Safe, Secure World for a Previously Abused Pet

If you know or suspect your dog was abused before she came to you, it's important to keep two things in mind: you shouldn't expect an overnight change in her, and you shouldn't count on a complete turnaround in her trust level or behavior.

It takes time to help an abused dog learn to be less fearful and develop trust in humans again. With knowledge, hard work, and commitment, a previously abused pet can be transformed into a much-loved member of your family, but she can't be reborn. It's important to always remember that.

Here are some general guidelines for creating a safe environment for a previously abused dog:

- Make her feel loved and needed; communicate clearly with her
- Do not force anything on her under any circumstances – allow her to adapt to her new family and life at her own pace. Provide her with a safe place where she can be alone when she feels like it
- Protect her from whatever she fears
- Create opportunities for her to be successful and build her confidence
- Feed her a balanced, species-appropriate diet and make sure she gets plenty of physical activity, including 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise each day. The form of exercise may need to be adapted so your pet feels safe.

Rehabilitating an abused dog presents a significant challenge, because these animals have been exposed to negative things they can't unlearn despite your best efforts. But it's important to feel hopeful, because life-changing progress can be made and there's nothing more gratifying.

If you've rescued a previously abused pet or are considering adoption, I highly recommend a program called A Sound Beginning, which was lovingly and expertly designed to help rescue dogs and adoptive guardians learn to communicate effectively and form an unbreakable bond.

## Sources and References

[Companion Animal Psychology December 3, 2014](#)

[The Bark March 12, 2015](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, 2015;18\(1\):92-111](#)

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