

GR News Column: Integrative Care for Golden Retrievers

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Preventing Stress in You and Your Dog During Dog Shows

Introduction

In the 1970's scientists reported that chronic stress weakens the immune system and leads to disease. (1-4). After recently attending a 4 day dog show that included conformation, obedience, and agility, I decided that it would be helpful to review the topic of stress during competition and provide stress reduction methods for both handlers, owners and their dogs.

Hans Selye, a pioneer in the area of stress research, defines *stress* as the body's non-specific response to any demand. He further describes *general adaptation syndrome* where the stressed individual demonstrates an alarm reaction following exposure to a noxious stimuli, then displays a resistance stage that yields increased defenses to the stressor, and finally manifests a state of exhaustion leading to disease or in extreme cases, death. (3,4). Goldstein (5) tells us that when an inflammation exists or during stressful situations, the adrenal glands are activated. They are located in proximity to the kidneys. The adrenal cortex releases cortisol to fight inflammation and stress and pulls sodium out of the cells. The sodium is flushed out the kidneys for excretion. This helps to explain why a person or animal with inflammation or stress feels thirsty and increases the need to eliminate. When the adrenal cortex is forced to work hard, so too do the kidneys. When I observe increased thirst and increased voiding in a dog, an automatic red flag goes up. If we take a dog with an inflammation into a stressful situation, where the temperature is on the high side and the handler is busy and cannot exercise or water the dog frequently, we increase that dog's stress level.

Vets sometimes prescribe Cortisone for inflammation. Dr Goldstein monitors animals on Cortisone and pays special attention to their alkaline phosphatase levels. Alkaline phosphatase, an enzyme, can elevate during Cortisone treatment. Dr. Goldstein prescribes glandulars and other natural remedies including Drenatrophin for adrenal support and needed calcium, He uses Adrenochelate if the alkaline phosphatase is high and ascorbic acid to balance the acidity. (5) Obviously, working with a vet is important in determining the need for such supplementation.

Goldens are especially sensitive to the moods and affect of the humans in their world. You have all heard the saying "one transmits feelings right down the lead." Your dog reads your body posture and movements and is influenced by them whether on or off lead. The same stressor may produce negative effects in one individual or dog but can yield motivational effects in a second. For example, some dogs go into a building where multiple competitive events are occurring and begin to pant, circle in their crates, become protective of their crates, develop diarrhea, bark and whine, and startle easily. Other dogs associate the excitement of the show setting with a time for fun and intense bonding with their owners. One dog may perceive a demand, an environment, or a situation with distress while another thrives on it. First and foremost, we need to learn to "read" our dog's body language in a variety of contexts so that we can adjust our voices, body posture, or the general environment to make the dog feel confident. Unfortunately, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive list of distress behaviors that apply to all Goldens. Each dog has a unique demeanor indicating stress. General signs of stress in canines include: incessant barking, panting, circling, excessive drinking, voiding, chewing and scratching; defensive behaviors like growling and touch sensitivity; trembling, diarrhea, vomiting, sound sensitivity, startling, total shut down, and reluctance to exit the crate. Once you have learned how your dog demonstrates signs of distress, you can take the appropriate measures to relax the dog, modify the environment or change your behavior. We need to know a variety of methods to produce relief and enhance the dog's focus without producing drowsiness.

Methods to Promote Relaxation in Canines

It is essential to make the dog's environment as comfortable as possible at dog shows. Noise levels at shows are usually over-stimulatory and air quality can be filled with sprays, chalk and smoke. Some handlers bring air purifiers, radios, and fans to assure the comfort of their dogs. One should use a crate that gives the dog plenty of room, ideally allowing him to stand up and stretch and including a comfortable mat, free access to water during waking hours, and a flow of air. Including an item from home helps, like a crate mat, a stuffed animal or a toy helps to reduce separation anxiety. Some dogs do better in a hard-shelled crate or a wire crate with a cover to block excessive visual stimulation. Other dogs love wire crates enabling them to watch all that is going on around them. There are many Golden Retrievers that need toys in their crate. I own a Golden who sucks on a toy to fall asleep.

It seems obvious that all dogs should be taken out of their crates as often as possible and exercised. Unfortunately, I have seen dogs left in crates without attention for too many hours. Under ideal conditions, Golden Retrievers benefit from play times with their handlers making shows more fun and less stressful. Massaging dogs can markedly reduce effects of stress. Ballner (6) has written a book dedicated to providing whisker to tail information with illustrations on how to massage a dog. Benefits of massage include enhancing the bond between you and your animal, increases opportunity to pay attention to the dog and provide affection, improves canine socialization skills, influences the dog's health including direct influences to the circulation, skin, muscles and coat. Muscles become more flexible and resilient. Massage also helps the dog become accustomed to handling, may modify a dog's behavior and is also relaxing for the handler.

Slow Stroking is another type of touch one can provide dogs that is similar to massage. Margaret Rood who was an occupational and physical therapist developed the technique. Farber (7) describes slow stroking as it is used on neurologically damaged people; however, over the years, I have used slow stroking to calm dogs. Figure 1 shows the handler placing one hand at the base of the dog's skull with the palm down and index and second finger on one side of dog's vertebral column and the third and fourth fingers on the other. The first hand is stroked down the back softly toward the tail and before lifting the hand off the dog's body; the other hand starts at the

base of the head. A continual rhythmic, repetitive stroking relaxes mind and body.

Insert Figure One

Any rhythmic repetitive movement, like rocking in a rocking chair is relaxing for humans. In treatment of neurologically damaged people, we discovered that antero-posterior (head to tail) rocking relaxed mind and muscle tone. This is easy to modify for dogs. Have them stand and gently rock them with slow movements with their feet fixed in one location. Keep the rhythm consistent. See the figure below.

Insert Figure Two

Linda Tellington-Jones, creator of Tellington Touch™, has written a wonderful new book applying all her stroking techniques to dogs, including diagrams, photographs, ground exercises, lead exercises, and problem solving techniques. (8) Briefly, TTouch™ is a treatment system utilizing circular stroking patterns done with the fingers or hands and applied all over the animal. It is designed to change functional thresholds at the cellular level. From my experience, TTouch™ has a profound effect on an animal's health, well-being and confidence. This technique is the first thing I start on a distressed animal. A novice can learn the methods from Linda's many books and videotapes or from workshops with TTouch™ practitioners.

Another method to reduce stress in dogs is to use Bach Flower Remedies. Graham and Vlamis (9) discuss the use of flower essences and their various effects on animals. The Bach Flower Remedies Co. (A Division of A. Nelson & Co, Ltd.) make various plants in liquid suspensions, each designed for different effects. Edward Bach was a well-known British physician who lived from 1886 to 1936. He studied many plants and identified 38 healing formulas based on flower essences and herbs. Currently there is a Flower Essence Society and several modern day scientists who have vastly increased the number of formulas that are effective for healing and other behavioral outcomes. Flower essences are useful in dogs to restore their natural balance. Several are specifically indicated in stressful situations including Rescue Remedy, a combination of 4 or 5 flower remedies. Agrimony is good for anxiety; aspen is used for fear and apprehension; beech for animals who do not like change in their routine, low attention span, and cerato for dogs lacking in self-assurance. For a Golden Retriever, 3 to 4 drops of flower

essence are placed directly on the tongue. Graham and Vlamis include detailed instructions along with various behaviors that benefit from flower essences.

If you are using baste in the conformation ring and notice that the dog tends to get diarrhea from one type of meat, like liver, change to something he tolerates. Many dogs do not tolerate any major change in their diet or water. Many people travel with water from home or take along various formulas to add to the water to prevent intestinal distress. Remember, no matter what activity you are doing with your dog, warm-up exercise is essential to prevent injuries.

Stress Management for Humans to Enhance Performance at Dog Shows

One of the fastest ways to calm your thinking and general state is to start breathing deeply from the diaphragm and place your index finger on your top lip with gentle pressure. Pressure receptors around the mouth are activated and they connect with the calming portion of the Autonomic Nervous System. You may notice that many people who are concentrating automatically put their hand up to their mouth. If your mouth is dry, try sucking on a mint while you are deep breathing. Also, while deep breathing, do mental practice and visualization. Your brain cannot tell if you are just practicing or if you are visualizing. Make sure you imagine yourself performing perfectly. Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.

Be sure to exercise regularly before attempting a dog show. Being in good physical condition helps you have enough energy to do what you need to do. Also, do not skip eating meals or drinking enough water. Pack a cooler with healthy foods and water for your show set-up to save you time. It is hard to find healthy foods at dog shows. Standing on hard cement floors causes discomfort throughout the body. Wear shoes with good support and be sure to get off your feet during the day. I make up an equipment checklist and keep it on the computer. By organizing my things and the dogs' equipment ahead of time, I reduce the stress of preparation for the dog show. Don't forget a chair. There never seem to be enough chairs at dog shows.

Most of this information is common sense for the experienced exhibitor. The novice exhibitor should remember that dog shows are supposed to be fun for you and your dog. By following these recommendations, you increase the probability of you and your dog enjoying the show.

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