ADAPTATION AND MANAGEMENT OF FEARFUL DOGS. ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS OF THE OWNERS

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Currently we receive dogs from a variety of origins, ranging from dogs adopted in shelters from other geographic origins to dogs bought from breeders hundreds of kilometres away. Many of them share very tragic backgrounds and often result in fearful behaviour. The owners consult us on how to act in different situations since it is not always easy to know what attitude to maintain or how to act. To understand how to act with a dog with fear, we must understand how fear was acquired.

The acquisition of fear is closely related to the various stages of life, which are the following:
- Prenatal period.
- Neonatal period: from 0 to 15 days.
- Transition period: from 15 to 21 days.
- Period of socialization: from 3 to 12 weeks.
- Juvenile period: from 12 weeks to the end of puberty, it depends specially on the breed and on the size of the dog.
- Adult period.
- Old age period.

Over the prenatal period, all the genetic factors and the relationship between the state of the mother during pregnancy and the subsequent behaviour of the offspring are established. A lot of literature on the heritability of behaviour is available that shows that fear is a highly heritable trait. One of the most classic studies is Dmitry Belyayev’s, in which foxes were selected for the trait of sociability and within just 40 generations they got non-aggressive foxes with people. Studies relating the social stress of the mother to the development of specific behaviour of the offspring have also been published.

The socialization period is one of the most important stages regarding the acquisition of fear and also very important in social relationships. During this period, habituation to the environment takes place, that is, the dog has special ability to get used to new stimuli compared to the rest of life stages. Habituation is a learning process in which, after repeated exposure to a specific stimulus, the individual shows less and less response. The most important factors on which habituation (not sensitization, which is the opposite process) are the following: the nature of the stimulus, the animal’s temperament, age, form of exposure and context. The stimuli to which the animal has not become familiarized with during the socialization period are more likely to cause fear in adulthood.

During the rest of life stages, fears may also be acquired, which are mostly related to negative experiences. Remember that an experience can be positive or neutral for one individual but negative for another and vice versa, this is why animals that have gone through the same experiences show different behaviours faced with the same stimulus; for example, some animals do not show fear of veterinary consultation after a medical review and the administration of a vaccine, while others do.

When a dog shows fear of a certain stimulus we must follow some basic guidelines that will help this fear to diminish or at least to avoid such a severe welfare problem to the animal:

- To avoid uncontrolled exposure: many owners wrongly consider that the more they expose the animal to the fearsome stimulus, the earlier the dog will lose fear. This is based on a behaviour modification technique known as flooding, the problem, apart from the ethical aspect, is that the incorrect
application will generate even greater behavioural problems. Therefore, the message should be to avoid conflicting situations if the dog is going to be afraid.

- **Progressive and adequate exposure**: the presentation of stimuli no matter they are unknown to the animal or they have already caused previous negative experience should be mild enough so that the animal does not show a fear behaviour. This means that the animal needs to be relaxed when facing the stimulus, and it must be far enough away so that the mechanisms of the fear response are not activated. For dogs with a phobia, it is often difficult to make these exposures and they will require specific behaviour modification sessions supervised by a professional in a controlled environment.

- **To offer an adaptation strategy**: fearful dogs tend to escape or hide when they get scared, but when these strategies are not viable or are repressed, aggressive behaviours are more likely, since these are usually useful to avoid conflict situations. For example, the dog that is afraid of the veterinary surgeon but does not show aggressiveness can usually be restrained and examined, while the one that is aggressive usually receives minimal examination. In order to reduce the likelihood of aggression and to improve the welfare of the animal, it should be allowed to flee or hide; for example, if the owner encounters the stimulus during the walk, he must walk in the opposite direction or stop somewhere as far back as possible until the negative stimulus for the dog has disappeared. This type of management improves the relationship with the owner and usually the dog has less tendency to escape. The more the fleeing and hiding behaviours are inhibited, the more the welfare problems and other associated behavioural problems such as aggression are probable to appear.

- **To respect the emotion**: fearful dogs often seek social support when they get scared, so it is important for owners to know how to detect and respect the fear, giving alternatives to the dog as hiding or fleeing in the opposite direction. You should never punish fear or its consequences; for example, a dog that flees from noises and pulls excessively on the leash should never be treated as a problem of obedience, if it is treated as an obedience problem, it will not be resolved or the welfare problem will be seriously aggravated.

- **To prepare the context**: when we expose the dog to an unknown stimulus or a stimulus that causes fear, it is important that the context does not have emotional negative keys; for example, in the veterinary practice, it is better for the staff to introduce themselves in the waiting room and accompany the dog to the examination room rather than suddenly entering to the examination room (as long as there has not been a bad experience in the waiting room).

All these guidelines are aimed at improving the behaviour but also the welfare of the animal and the relationship with the owner. But owners often pose specific questions about dogs with fear that can be difficult to answer. Some of them are the following:

- Why doesn’t my dog relieve himself on the street and waits to get home to do it? Dogs with a lot of fear and continuously exposed to environments with too many stressful stimuli may have elimination problems. The reason is that the dog is in a state of hypervigilance that does not allow him to urinate or defecate; it is usually solved with walks in quieter areas in which the dog does not feel afraid.

- Why doesn’t my dog take the treats on the street? For the same reason that they do not urinate or defecate, they may have problems accepting the treats, the dog is in a state of hypervigilance where food is not a priority. These dogs should walk in places with less stimulation and at times with few stimuli.

- Why doesn’t my dog pay attention to me? Not all these cases are due to fear behaviours, but some do. The reason is the same as in the previous questions, in fact, dogs with a phobia of certain stimuli tend to have all three characteristics at once: they do not urinate or defecate, do not eat and do not pay attention to the owners. If this attitude is generalized during the entire walk, we are facing a severe problem of behaviour and we should refer the animal to a veterinary ethologist.

- Why, if my dog is afraid, will bark at people, chase them or turn around barking? As mentioned above, many dogs with fear have a tendency to flee or hide, but some individuals opt for the attack, and which they pretend is that the negative stimulus disappears. Apart from individuals with more tendency to
aggression, many of the dogs with fear aggression show it after repeated attempts to flee or hide without any success; with the repetitions the animal stops trying to flee and shows directed aggression. Once the dog has learned that being aggressive resolves the situation, for example the person moves away or moves the other dog away, aggression can be used as a tool to avoid conflicting situations; the animals that have completed this process usually have a negative prognosis.

- This dog has been hit a lot, right? In many cases, the dog has not gone through experiences of physical abuse, but neglect, lack of care and experiences, which often have dire consequences on the behaviour of the animal, and these are usually the most serious cases, since learning is often more difficult. Well-socialized animals that have suffered traumatic experiences in juvenile or adult stages usually have a better prognosis than those who have suffered neglect.

- Will does my dog lose fear over time? It will mostly depend on the way in which he is exposed to the stimuli; if the exposure is correct (following the parameters discussed above), he will probably lose fear, but if the exposures are excessive in number or intensity, the fear will not disappear and it may even get worse.

- Well, I do not think he's afraid because he does not say anything. Often dogs that are afraid but have no tendency to aggression enter a process of learned helplessness, this means that, as resisting a certain activity has not been effective, they have stopped trying it, but it does not mean that they are adapted to the environment.

- Why in the shelter my dog was the quietest and now attacks everybody? Because, initially, he was inhibited due to the sudden change of environment and, as he adapts, he shows behaviours that are more adjusted to his emotions. This process is often difficult to understand, and we must also warn that it is likely that the dog will continue to get worse until the behaviour stabilizes.

- Would a house in the mountains be better? We must remember that dogs are tremendously sociable animals, so they do not adapt to environments without social contact with people; quiet environments are good for dogs provided they have enough contact with people (they should not be alone for more than 10 hours a day) and this contact is positive. Therefore, if these conditions are not met, it is likely that the animal is not well adapted to even rural environments.

- When my dog barks at someone, should I scold him? No, you should not punish the behaviours motivated by fear, it is much better to move away.

The owners may pose many other questions and it is important that we give clear and concise answers so that they maintain their trust in us and we can help them to have a coexistence with the maximum of benefits and the minimum perceived costs.

REFERENCES
