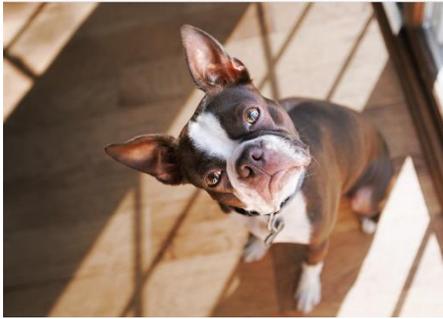


How to Talk to Your Dog ... and why you should

by Kate Mooney
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I talk to my dog incessantly. I work from home, so we hang out all the time. I'll send an email, fire off a tweet, write two words of a story — you know, work — and then casually glance over at her and inquire, “Do you love your mom?!” When I can't stop obsessing over something dumb, I tell her, Dr. Dog, all about it. Then, like any sane person would, I ventriloquize her in the high-pitched, yet world-weary tone I've assigned to her. (“Hmmm... okay” would probably be her tagline).

I'm far from the only human to talk to their pet; this tendency to anthropomorphize our animal companions (and even inanimate objects we hold dear, like our phones, cars, or guitars) is practically second nature. The habit combats loneliness, and some research suggests it's even a sign of intelligence. (Great news!) But the fact remains that this conversation is somewhat one-sided.

Or is it? Most dog owners will swear that their dogs do respond to what they say. Although the average dog can understand roughly 165 words, it's likely that body language and tone matter much more than the actual content of what you're saying. They're really reading your emotional affect, according to the psychologist Stanley Coren, the author of *How to Speak Dog*. Talking to your dog can be therapeutic, so it really is good for you. Here's how to do it.

Use a positive emotional tone

As a dog owner, the way you communicate with your pup sets the tone for how they navigate the world. Your response to a given situation signals to them whether to feel safe or threatened. Baby talk, or what's known as “motherese” — a high-pitched, sing-songy, lilting way of speaking — puts your dog at ease, while a deeper, commanding voice is more likely to intimidate them.

Coren gives the example of an oscillating fan with a plastic bag caught in it, a foreign object that your dog could perceive as a threat. “The owner can do one of two things: act like it's scary and say, ‘Oh, wow, that's ugly!’ Or, ‘Wow, isn't that interesting, that's really nice.’ One's positive, one's negative.” It's your voice, more than the situation, that determines what happens next: “If it's negative, the dog stays away from it; if it's positive, they'll approach it with the owner.”

Of course, you're not always going to take a positive tone; it's hard to feel like cooing when you come home to trash strewn everywhere and a chewed-up hole in your sneaker. But a tricky thing about having a dog is that while you are responsible for correcting their behavior, you also want them to associate you with positive feelings, not with punishments.

“The more good associations your dog has with you, the more it's going to seep into the world around you that your dog exists in,” says the trainer Annie Grossman, who co-founded School for the Dogs in New York. Rather than scold your dog when they do something you don't like, she suggests, consider what emotional state led to their behavior. Most of what we consider bad

behavior, like excessive barking or aggression, stems from fear or stress. Pinpoint what's upsetting them — often it's as predictable as the postal worker sticking letters in the mail slot, or that barking poodle you pass on walks — and find a way to make the trigger less scary by pairing it with something your dog likes, like a treat or a pat on the head.

Pay attention to body language

In addition to voice, your dog is highly attuned to your body language. If you tense up when a stranger approaches, that puts your own dog on alert. If you want them to feel safe in a situation, make sure you show that you're relaxed.

And it's a two-way conversation — dogs also use their body language to show you how they feel about a given situation. According to Grossman, before escalating to growling or biting, a dog will show that it's uncomfortable through excessive lip licking or yawning to communicate distress, or a stiff back, with ears down and tail between the legs, to signal fear.

When you approach a dog, especially one you don't know, take care to read their body language first. A few tips from Coren: “Never start the interaction by putting your hand over the dog's head. That's both a threat and a dominance signal. Best to let the dog approach you. Make yourself look a little smaller, stooping down a little, making inviting sounds. Move slowly; quick motions are more likely to be misunderstood.”

Let them cheer you up

If you've ever suspected that your dog's extra attentive when you're feeling down, it's not your imagination: they can tell when you're depressed or anxious, or even under the weather. This hypersensitivity to our emotional state is why they're so good at being emotional support animals.

What's more, talking to your dog when you're upset can actually make you feel better. And they enjoy the attention, too. They may not have any idea who Paul is or what he did to ruin your life, but often they'll make eye contact and sit near you while you blabber on as long as you want. “In some respects, that's what traditional talk therapists do: they provide a sounding board,” explains Coren. “The fact that the dog is paying attention and not judging what you're saying, and is remaining close, is very reassuring.”

Moreover, hearing the sound of your own words in a vacuum — “Phoebe, why am I like this? When is it gonna stop?!” — to no response but your pup quizzically tilting her head back at you, can make you realize how ridiculous you sound, and help you laugh at the situation, and yourself. You're in a better mood, no copay required.



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