

Dog trainer **Lez Graham** explains how to keep a dog happy and healthy during emotional events in family life.

Have you noticed how life has an order all of its own? You spend your childhood with your parents – growing up with a dog if you're lucky – and adolescence is a bit rocky, but it has to be to ensure you leave the nest. Then you go to college or get a job, you set off on your own, fall in love and get married. Then along come children, you get a dog, wait for them to leave home, get another dog, enjoy life, get another dog, settle into the swing of it, get another dog and then along comes the final adventure. At least that's how it used to be...

CHANGING TIMES

Nowadays, life's order goes a bit more like this: You spend your childhood with your parents, growing up with a dog, then your parents split and you fill between houses

and the dog stays with you – or ends up in rescue. Adolescence is tough, and there's no dog to pour your heart out to.

Next, you leave home, go to college, finish college and go back home. You get a job, then a steady partner and leave home. And when your relationship breaks down, you go back home again. You go steady again, leave home and make a commitment by getting a dog. But your unruly dog puts pressure on your relationship so you find the dog in to rescue, before splitting up with your partner. Then along comes another new dog, until the relationship splits... and so it goes on.

It's not always like this, I deliberately made it extreme so you can see where the dog fits in with modern lifestyles and relationships – but it does happen.

Dogs can pick up an emotional unrest.

When the going gets tough



SOCIAL HUNTER

The dog, being a social hunter, has a psyche not all that dissimilar to our own, men especially. They like rules, they like to know what's expected of them and when, and they like to know the consequences involved if those rules are broken. Women are also social hunters but, if you go back to hunter-gatherer times and our innate behaviour, we tend to gather, meander, touch, taste, feel and talk – normally all at the same time. To see our classic behaviour in action, think of going shopping with the opposite sex [yes, I am generalising!]. Women 'gather' the clothing, touch, talk, check items, try them on and maybe go back and touch some more. On the other hand, men 'hunt' the clothes; he goes into the shop, finds and hunts the target, then heads home.

Can you imagine the mayhem on a hunt if the leader said "Right, that's the one – go get it!" and all the hunters started debating it or said things like "But I prefer the one back there," or "Are you sure?", "Do we have to go for the white one? I prefer the look of the black one," and so on. It

would be chaos! The same is true for all social hunters, including the dog. If the leader said something is to be done, it is done or there are consequences. In a balanced home – where the dog is getting the right mix of discipline, exercise, rewards, fun, cuddles and all is good – the dog will, for the most part, follow you without any hassle whatsoever. And why shouldn't he? You are the provider of all and sundry.

EMOTIONAL UNREST

But what happens when things go wrong at home?

What happens when the fabric of family life starts to unravel a little? We know how much it can affect our children and allowances are made, but what about the dog?

Regardless of whether there are children involved or not, the dog will feel the change in the energy being transmitted by his owners. To start off with he may get walked more than ever, as one or both owners try to clear their heads and organise their thoughts; this is much better than being walked less often as attention is turned inwards in the relationship.

A dog that isn't walked much will have excess energy – energy to turn to other things, like chewing tables, shoes and furnishings. Yes, you guessed it, that will normally lead to the dog being scolded after the event, confirming to the dog that you're just not yourself at the minute and so he'd better start taking care of things himself.

The excess energy could lead to pacing and an inability to settle as well as excessive attention seeking, which, if the owner's mind is on other things, will lead to either the dog being scolded or talked to harshly. Alternatively, he may be cuddled and become a free therapist.

None of these scenarios are good for the pet dog, who can't cope with complex emotions.

Some dogs become very stressed and nervous, others try to take control of a situation that they're not equipped to take control of and may start nipping or bullying the owner.

After scolding the dog may come guilt and excessive coddling – and a breaking of the rules. Dogs really do need to know what is allowed and what is not; if one minute they're allowed on the settee so the owner can cry into their shoulder and the next minute they're being scolded for getting up, the weaker dog may become neurotic. All of this emotional unrest and he won't know what to do with himself. The stronger dog may just decide that he enjoys being on the settee and on the settee he will stay, thank you very much.

CALLING THE SHOTS

It's all quite far-fetched isn't it in that case, let me give you a real example. A lady contacted me about four years ago as her beautiful Golden Retriever had started to growl at her when he was on the settee, or if she turned over in bed he would stand up and growl at her. About eight months earlier she had split up from her husband and Harry, her dog, had become the focus of her world. She talked endlessly to him, and cuddled and cried into him at night while watching the telly. Within three months of her husband leaving, her dog started to become aggressive



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towards her. It doesn't always happen, but in this case it did. The owner had gone from being quite a strong person to someone very weak and dependent. She'd stopped saying 'no' to her dog and basically started allowing him to do whatever he wanted to do. Harry, being the strong dog that he was, started to enjoy the privileges being bestowed upon him and started 'calling the shots' as the animal in charge would. The roles had reversed and rather than the lady telling Harry 'no' for getting on the sofa, Harry started to tell his owner 'no'.

If a dog's routine is upset and he doesn't get enough exercise, he may direct his attention elsewhere.



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Not only does upheaval in the home affect kids, it can have a negative impact on dogs too.

NEW LOVE

This wasn't the reason why the owner called me, though. As is often the case, a new man had entered her life and not only was Harry saying 'no' to her but he was saying 'NO!' to her new beau. The catalyst for the call was when the new man went to the toilet one night, went to get back into bed and Harry stood up, bared his teeth and refused him access.

Not a great start to a romance! Because Harry had always had a balanced home life with lots of walks, praise and play, as well as rules at home, he used to be a fairly laid-back chap. When the walks became intermittent and the excessive privileges came along, he did what any self-respecting animal would do and milked them to the max; remember, dogs, like every other animal on the planet, live by the rule of 'survival of the fittest' – they have no ethics, no principles and no morals. So, when a potential usurper came along, Harry responded the only way he knew how, which was to show his strength.

Harry was basically a very nice dog, so all we had to do was return to the old way of life before the husband left. Harry fell into line and relaxed into his role of pet man once again. What did we do? Well, very little to Harry, actually, other than more walks, quality playtime and some time on his own. We did empower the owner, though, set up some basic house rules and gave her back the furniture that Harry

had taken control of – including her bed – as well as the lovely dog she'd had a year before.

GETTING THROUGH IT

Things do go wrong, as well as right, with relationships. If you find yourself going through a rough patch it's so important for your dog's mental health to try to keep to routines wherever possible, even if it means employing a dog walker to help you out on days when life all feels too much. Your dog will help you through it, but not as an emotional crutch or a confidence, but as the only thing he knows how to be – and that is a dog.

About the author

Lez Graham works full-time as a canine behaviour practitioner and gundog trainer; she is the education and development officer with the Club of Dog Trainers and is a tutor with the Cambridge Institute of Dog Behaviour & Training. Lez has just published her first book, *The Pet Gundog*.