



CANINE GOOD BEHAVIOUR SERIES

Obsessive Behavior

Do dogs get obsessive-compulsive disorder? We're not sure. Since dogs don't use words, no one can interview a dog and find out what thoughts accompany the dog's behavior.

We see cases of a dog repeating a behavior over and over, though, with resulting harm either to the dog or to others. We'll call it "obsessive behavior" here, with the understanding that other terms might also apply. Perhaps the dog becomes addicted to the behavior because of stimulating or soothing chemicals it releases in the body.

Habits are easily formed and sometimes it may be as simple as a strong habit. Whatever the cause, obsessive behaviors often occur that require modification. Let's talk about what to do if your dog falls into one of these patterns, as well as good habits YOU can form in handling your dog that will help protect against this happening.

Suffering from an Obsession

Before looking at ways to prevent your dog from developing an obsessive behavior, we'll consider some of these behaviors and what the results can be. Some of the most common ones are various forms of self-mutilation.

Dogs sometimes lick a leg until the wound reaches the bone. Some dogs chew their toenails. Severe damage to the tail can result from chasing and biting it, or lying down chewing on it. Dogs have also done severe damage to their genitals with licking and chewing.

Particular types of self-mutilation occur more often in some breeds than others, such as tail damage in German Shepherds and licking damage to legs in Dobermans.

Hot spots are caused by the dog licking and sometimes biting at the skin. With hot spots we often know the dog is itching. Sometimes other types of self-mutilation are obviously started by pain or itching or other sensation the dog is feeling, but it may be difficult to find the root problem. Dogs have a strong tendency to hide their pain, and it seems not to be natural for humans to think of pain as the cause of undesirable dog behavior. We tend to think the dog is doing it to spite us!

The first step should always be to look for a physical cause. Dogs get all sorts of orthopedic and other painful problems at all stages of life. It is possible that even things like tail docking may cause pain later in life. The dog can't go take a pill or ask for one. A dog's options for coping with pain are limited. It takes human detective work to find many of these problems.

Scratching with toenails does a lot of damage, too, and can easily become a habit. Humping other dogs, humans or inanimate objects can become a habit. Chasing cars, barking or jumping at the television when it's turned on, digging holes in the yard, eating household objects, chasing joggers and kids on bicycles—any behavior a dog is allowed to repeat over and over can become such a strong habit that it represents a serious problem.

One of the stranger obsessive behaviors is chasing light. This one may sometimes be due to a neurological problem. Possibly there is a component of brain malfunction in many obsessive behavior cases. Fly-biting, for example, is thought at times to be part of a seizure disorder, but it can also be a nutty habit/obsession a dog develops as something to do.

We have learned that different breeds have different eye structures and see the world differently. What other differences might there be in how different dogs perceive the world, what they experience, what they feel? Do some German Shepherds perhaps chase their tails because their hips feel strange?

The light-chasing behavior is seen sometimes in breeds such as the Border Collie, a breed with a special trait of using "eye" to direct the movements of livestock. Terriers seem to develop the light-chasing behavior more easily than most other breeds, too, and their "gameness" is another strongly-focused behavior bred into them by humans. It seems likely there is a relationship between the light chasing and their genetics.

Treatment

What it takes to manage an obsessive behavior will vary according to the intensity and potential harmfulness of the behavior. The first step is a medical evaluation, even if you don't see how pain could be involved. In virtually any behavior, it could be! Dogs will do the strangest things to try to cope with pain.

The next step is to interrupt the damaging behavior. That may require bandaging, an Elizabethan collar or other device to prevent the dog from reaching the target area with the mouth or toenails, and/or medication. To employ these measures you will need to work with a veterinarian to make sure you're doing them safely. For more difficult cases, the veterinary behavior specialist may well be the best option.

If the dog is chasing cars, bicycles or joggers, a fence might be all you need to interrupt the behavior. In the case of a dog running through an electronic fence, move up to a real fence or take the dog out on leash and long line instead of trusting to the electronic collar system. When such behaviors become strong enough, electronic fences fail, as does boundary training.

If the dog is on a seek-and-destroy mission to eat socks or chew shoes or hump people, supervision is the key. When you're able to supervise the dog, you keep the dog in the room with you—on leash if necessary—and remain ready to redirect inappropriate behavior into appropriate behavior at all times.

To change an obsessive behavior of any kind, teach substitute behaviors the dog can use to cope with whatever feelings are prompting the inappropriate behavior. You do this over and over and over until the dog forms habits of switching to the alternative behaviors without your reminders. You avoid creating new problems by doing the switches in a positive manner, so the dog doesn't develop any fear or other hang-ups about the training or about the new behaviors.

It's essential to teach multiple alternative behaviors. You don't want to teach a dog just one new behavior to substitute for the obsession, or you could wind up with a new obsession! Variety is very important.

When you are not able to keep the dog in the room with you and supervise, you need a place for the dog to rest and stay out of trouble. This place must not be abused, or it will itself become a source of more stress to the dog.

Excessive confinement causes damage to dogs, just as it does to humans. Like humans, dogs need interesting things in their lives, things to look forward to. They need to eliminate, sleep, eat and drink on a reasonable schedule, and if left too long at a time without all these needs being met, problem behaviors are sure to result.

It's necessary to take a "whole-life approach" to working with a dog. Most everything in the dog's life affects everything else. Making sure the dog gets enough attention, enough exercise, enough chances to go out and potty, etc. may very well represent the difference between managing an obsessive behavior problem successfully or without success.

Prevention

The same methods that can prevent an obsessive behavior in the first place are important to managing the obsessive dog lifelong so that, once the problem is under control, it stays under control. The ideas here will help manage any exceptionally intelligent, highly active dog.

Remember that intelligence is not only a matter of how the dog learns commands. Some breeds—such as terriers—are not so interested in commands, but can be brilliant when performing tasks they were bred to excel in, such as going after critters in the ground. Sighthounds are similarly smart with a different agenda, chasing prey by sight.

People who know dogs are often astonished to hear others say that breeds such as Labrador and Golden Retrievers are "stupid." Not a bit of it! The brightest dogs are often complete mysteries to people who don't understand dogs. If you choose to have a dog of a breed that has been genetically refined by human breeding to be able to work all day, it's your responsibility to provide the dog with appropriate training and management. That's also your best bet for avoiding obsessive behaviors.

The popular expression "a tired dog is a good dog" can be misleading. Healthy fatigue from appropriate exercise that uses both mind and body without excessive stress or physical damage is a good kind of tired. Taking a dog to a free-for-all and letting the dog hump and bully other dogs, or get frightened and injured by fierce dogs and harmful physical maneuvers is likely to lead to various forms of behavioral weirdness.

The best way to keep a dog from developing obsessive behaviors is to teach the dog the widest possible variety of beneficial behaviors.

Teach the dog to retrieve—and use a variety of objects, not just one. Place the objects in a variety of situations for the dog to retrieve them.

If the dog is physically sound to change positions, teach the sit, stand, down and stay, and use them in a variety of ways with nice rewards. Don't use rewards as bribes. Keep the reward out of sight or across the room or in the kitchen, and teach the dog a word that means "You're about to get a reward!" Then get the reward out and give it to the dog.

You could use a clicker for this signal instead of a word, if you choose. Either way, you're able to time it so the dog knows what the reward is for, but is working on the possibility of a reward and hopefully eventually also for the fun of it. If you dangle a treat out in front of a dog when giving a cue, the dog is put in the position of eyeballing that treat and deciding if it's a fair trade! That's a bribe, and sooner or later it will not be strong enough to keep the trained behavior going. The possibility of a reward is a stronger incentive than a bribe in the long run. So keep the treats out of sight until it's time to deliver one.

Dogs have behaviors they can use to diffuse their own excess energy and to calm themselves. These behaviors vary from one dog to another. Chewing is a common one. The adolescent stage when the permanent teeth come in and the dog feels the urge to do a lot of chewing to set them firmly into the jawbone is the ideal time to form good habits of chewing on appropriate toys. Make sure the dog has toys in a variety of textures to chew that the dog can get to without your help, whether in the crate or laying on the floor in a room. Aim for three textures, and try to duplicate the textures of inappropriate things you have found the dog chewing.

Whenever you find a dog chewing the wrong thing, spritz that wrong item with a bittering agent such as Bitter Apple and quickly give the dog a proper toy to chew. Do this over and over. Associate a word with these proper objects, perhaps "toy." At first it's often a good idea to place the toys right next to the dog's resting spots. Eventually you will likely be able to say "find a toy," "get your toy" or something of the sort; and the dog will get up and seek whatever toy appeals to the dog at that moment.

With the toy behavior, you can get your dog to switch the mouth from self-mutilation to chewing the toy. This is incredibly beneficial for the life of the dog. Not only will you be able to remind the dog to do it, but the dog will often think to do it without being reminded. This is likely meeting a need of the dog for a self-calming behavior,

such as a human reading herself to sleep or watching television with a sleep timer to go to sleep at night.

If you have multiple dogs, you'll have to take special care with toy selection. Toys have to meet the dogs' chewing needs, but not be so appealing the group will fight over them. It helps to have extra toys, too, at least one of every type of toy for each dog, and possibly more. It can seem ridiculous sometimes to have all those toys around, but they are necessities, not luxuries.

As you teach your dog behaviors and games, and observe things your dog starts to do independently, think about where each behavior could lead. Sometimes all it takes to turn a behavior into a problem is for you to let the dog do it several times and you laugh in amusement when the dog does it. It's hard to believe dogs are that sensitive to our laughter as a sign of approval, but many of them are.

Some things are interesting and exciting to watch a dog do, but potentially harmful to encourage. This is when people need to exercise self-discipline, and interrupt the cute stunt to direct the dog into a more appropriate behavior.

You can see where having done the training right from the start becomes essential—because if you have not done that, you don't HAVE behaviors to redirect your dog into when an inappropriate behavior first begins! So hit the ground training when you first meet your dog!

Start by teaching your dog eye contact (see [Eye Contact](#)) and in the process your dog will learn his or her name within the first couple of days. If the dog already has a name, don't hesitate to change the name. Changing the name does no harm, and in fact may help the dog make a better transition to your home. Just be sure to invest the new name with lots of good associations.

Use bits of the dog's regular food to teach desired behaviors, and then give whatever of the meal hasn't already been fed as training inducements in the dish at the next meal. That way you don't upset a new dog's digestive system with various strange foods.

Spend time grooming the dog every day. This will help identify potential sites of pain, provide calming and bonding benefits, strengthen the dog's responsiveness to you and ability to handle being touched, and many other benefits. It's a combination of care and training that makes for an extremely efficient use of time spent with a dog. It will certainly help in the prevention and treatment of obsessive behavior.

Besides teaching the dog to retrieve, teach the dog to come toward you in every possible way and situation. If you include chasing games in this interaction, the dog needs to be chasing the person, never a person chasing the dog. You definitely don't want a dog to develop the habit or even the notion of running from humans because it leads to being hit by cars.

You don't want a dog to chase down a human and grab or pounce on the person, either. So build in a "soft landing" to a target. This could be sitting for a treat, catching a ball you toss to the dog, or running alongside you until the two of you slow and stop together. Twists and turns in your route tend to keep the dog involved in staying up with you.

Now you have a powerful way to redirect a dog who takes off after something to chase it—call the dog and initiate a game of the dog chasing you instead, allowing you to bring the dog back under control. Your training must be strong, though, to induce a dog to leave a novel chase and come back to old, familiar you. If you allow the dog to be in this position too much, the training is likely to eventually fail, so save it for emergencies and keep the chasing dog on a leash around large temptations.

As you develop games with your dog, these will become strong enough to use as rewards. Daily grooming will enhance your petting as a reward the dog desires, too. Using praise in the eye contact exercise along with treats will strengthen your praise as a reward the dog is more likely to value. All of this makes your training become less dependent on food. It also makes your dog's mind more flexible, and that's a major step in preventing or overcoming obsessive behavior.

Laser lights and flashlight games need special mention. Don't! These games commonly lead to obsessive behaviors. A laser light can also damage a dog's eyes. When an obsession with light-chasing becomes full-blown, the dog may require lifelong medication to control the ceaseless search for any beam of light or shadow to follow.

One use for a laser light is to direct an assistance dog to an object the disabled handler needs retrieved. If the light is to be used for this purpose, it should never be turned into a game or sport. The dog's tasks need to be varied so that the laser is not used too often or for too long at a time.

Due to the potential for serious obsessive behavior as well as eye damage, it may be best to use other methods for cuing an

assistance dog rather than a light. The newer flashlights with long-lasting LED bulbs can also cause eye damage.

When a dog has surgery, including routine spay or neuter surgery, it's important to have a plan in place to stop any self-mutilation before it can even start. Plan to be available to supervise your dog as much as possible after the dog comes home from the hospital.

Ask the veterinarian what bittering agent will be safe to use to discourage chewing. One approach—pending the veterinarian's approval—is to spritz the area with Bitter Apple four times a day, so that the dog's first attempts to lick will be met with an awful taste and that taste will be renewed often enough to keep the reminder working.

Of course it's important to keep the dog as comfortable as possible and provide alternative chew items. Your companionship helps, too, and gentle daily grooming and/or massage—check with the veterinarian to make sure you don't handle the dog in any way that would cause harm with the incision.

Restricted activity is usually prescribed, which obviously means not having a dog jump up or down from a grooming table! You can sit on the floor with the dog, though, and gently maneuver the body for grooming. Supervising your dog after surgery to prevent self-mutilation or other harm can turn into an incredible bonding time.

A Lifestyle

Many of our dogs are born with powerful hard-wired drives. Some drives are part of the basic "dog" package, as evidenced by the fact that most puppies carry out those behaviors. Digging is a typical one, and chasing fast-moving objects is another.

As the dog matures, you see behaviors more specific to the dog's breed and to that individual dog, some of which can be extreme. The Border Collie's hunting behavior has been selectively bred to create a dog extremely trainable to herd livestock, sheep in particular—all day, every day. Labrador Retrievers have been bred to retrieve for the hunter all day, without being too fussy about getting cold or wet or running through brambles. Terriers were bred to do battle with wild animals that go to ground and cause problems to agriculture, such as rats and foxes.

Is it any wonder that dogs bred to do repetitive behaviors vigorously for long periods of time could easily develop obsessions if not given enough to do to keep their minds and bodies occupied?

So if we want these types of dogs, it's up to us to provide healthy activities to keep them sane.

If you're equal for the challenge, staying one step ahead of a high-gear dog will keep you active both mentally and physically. Your blood pressure and your brainpower will both benefit. You'll live longer and have fewer doctor visits. Really!

The same would be true if you decided to adopt a human toddler, and some dogs can be about that same amount of work! Obsessive behaviors like those we see in dogs also occur in zoo animals, and enriching the animals' environments has become the solution. One difference between zoo animals and our dogs is that taming a zoo animal only works up to a point, while we want our dogs to be thoroughly tame. Activities that involve interaction with humans do a much better job of this than activities that focus on just enriching the zoo animal's confinement area.

The prevention ideas here will get you started in a healthy, non-obsessive lifestyle with your dog, and beyond that you can research your breed, share ideas with other people involved with the breed, and look into breed-specific sports. Terriers have earthdog events, retrievers have hunting retriever tests, herding dogs have herding events—and all breeds can participate in sports such as tracking and rally obedience that bring you and your dog together as a special team.

Don't delay getting veterinary help for a dog who is suffering distress, damage or danger from an obsessive behavior. The earlier the intervention, the better the result is likely to be. With patience and persistence, you can effect excellent changes in a dog's behavior. Your veterinarian will be your ally in making that possible.

Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book [Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others](#). Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.

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