



All Wrapped Up: One Way to Deal with Your Dog's Fears and Anxieties



I first read about the concept of an anxiety wrap for dogs in the December 2002 issue of *The Whole Dog Journal* in an article entitled “It’s a Wrap”. At the time I found it interesting and filed it away as something to consider when working with dogs I taught at Mad City Dog Training or if I should ever foster an anxious dog. Little did I know how soon I’d be using the concept!

In June 2002 we agreed to foster a heartworm positive Lab who was incredibly hyper, even for an adolescent Lab. The doofus wound his way into our hearts and we ended up adopting him. He was a wonderful dog, but was very anxious around other dogs and would become aggressive when he felt threatened. We began behavior modification to help him learn what to do when he felt anxious and for some reason, I thought about the anxiety wrap article. I picked up an inexpensive child’s t-shirt, slipped it on Beamish, and was amazed to see his eyes soften and his body relax instantly. He was able to focus on me and worry less about the other dogs in our obedience class. He wasn’t completely cured, but the t-shirt definitely took the edge off his anxiety which allowed him to concentrate on our training program. If I took the shirt off before the end of class, Beamish would start to rev up and become anxious again, so we left it on pretty much whenever we were out of the house. Why would such an odd thing work? Two very different sources have researched the issue.

The first source is TTouch practitioners. TTouch was developed by Linda Tellington-Jones as a way to help train horses, help the horses and owners bond, and relax the horse’s mind and body. It was quickly adapted for use in companion animals. TTouch uses a system of specific touches, lifts, and stretches to improve blood flow, relax the animal, and increase body awareness. One of the tools used to continue TTouch benefits for longer is a body wrap. *Getting in TTouch with Your Dog* by Linda Tellington-Jones illustrates several techniques for wrapping an ace bandage around a dog to enhance “your dog’s sense of his own body and makes him more confident in his movements and behavior.” From the TTouch concept of a body wrap comes Susan Sharpe’s Anxiety Wrap. (<http://www.anxietywrap.com>) Her Anxiety Wrap is a simpler and more attractive alternative to ace bandages and allows what TTouch calls “maintained pressure” to continue to soothe the dog.

Autism researchers and Temple Grandin, the author of *Thinking in Pictures: And Other Reports of My Life with Autism*, are the second source of research on why pressure soothes. As an autistic child, Grandin was often overwhelmed by physical touch, but was extremely comforted by wedging herself under couch cushions. Later she developed a “Hug Machine” after watching how much calmer cattle are while being gently squeezed in a chute. The constant and controlled pressure are very effective in soothing her anxiety, as well as the anxiety of people with autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders world wide. The Hug Machine appears to ground people and help them to focus better.

After hearing Grandin speak at a dog training conference, I began to realize that Beamish's snug t-shirt was a way to give him the maintained pressure and contact that he desperately craved. A snug fit is important. If I put Beamish in one of my large t-shirts there was no change. But when I discovered that a size 5T shirt, put on backwards (so the tag was under his chin), fit my 68 lb dog just about perfectly he had enough pressure to soothe him. Susan Sharpe mentions securing adult t-shirts on dogs with duct tape, which is effective but not very attractive.

Not all dogs will benefit from a body wrap, but it is certainly something to consider for dogs who have generalized or specific anxiety. Wraps are most commonly suggested for dogs with thunderstorm or noise phobias, but can also benefit dogs who suffer from motion sickness, separation anxiety, hyperactivity, fear of grooming or touch sensitivity, and some forms of aggression and antisocial behavior. Of course for all of these issues, with the exception of motion sickness, a wrap will not be a cure-all and behavior modification, under the supervision of an experienced trainer, must be addressed.