

THE BEHAVIORAL BENDS

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Well, he's home. Whether he was a long planned "perfect match" decided in advance by you and the Adoption Coordinator, or he was the winning contestant in a long lineup of four-legged orphans, he's your baby now.

The adoption process was very involved. You had to sign things, learn about his diet, his training and his veterinary history, and you had a ton of questions. You were gently prepared for some things and sternly warned against others. Your head was swimming with information and your heart was bursting with joy. As you and your new best friend drove away from the shelter, watching it grow smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror, it started to dawn on you: it's you and him now. With every tick of the odometer, "Axel" is becoming less of that face-in-a-crowd, that never-changing portrait on the shelter website, that abstract future houseguest, and is becoming YOUR dog. All of the stuff they said to you in the Get Acquainted room is starting to fade. All of the generalities and rules and hints...you trust in the shelter staff's experience, but you know it will work out. It was, after all, meant to be.

There. Did you sense it? That thought, that conviction you felt in your gut that "it will work out" because it was "meant to be"...that is the first hint that you and your adopted dog may be about to suffer from a case of The Behavioral Bends.

THE BEHAVIORAL WHAT?

Bends. In human deep sea divers, the bends are a consequence of ascending from one depth and amount of pressure to another without sufficient acclimatization. A person pulled back up to the surface too quickly after being deep in the ocean can lose his life because of the bends. The effect of the Behavioral Bends on a dog can be just as grave.

When Axel first moves into your home, he may have one or two accidents. He may be unclear about the rules regarding furniture or barking. He may rough it up with your other dog once or twice. But with your help, he'll start to figure things out. For a few weeks, things are looking good. This is when we get the wonderful e-mail or note telling us how easily Axel has fit into his new life, how he seems as if he's always lived there. And sometimes, that's just what happens. If "happily-ever-after" didn't occur every once in awhile, none of us would be able to do rescue work at all! However, there's a much more common phone call or e-mail we get shortly after this honeymoon. It seems that Axel has suddenly developed an attitude problem!

The episodes which prompt this phone call are usually characterized by their apparently random nature, are often directed at a victim who is relatively known to the dog, and are accompanied by the owner's total shock and disappointment at what seems to be a newly uncovered "mean streak". According to the extensive records at the agency where I train, these regressions tend to take place within a fairly uniform time frame, normally between the dog's third to sixth week in the new home, and well after what most pet owners would consider an ample readjustment period.

Over time, I've heard this phenomenon described as "the end of the honeymoon", "the Test", and one friend refers to it as "Heeeeere's Johnny!" after Jack Nicholson's metamorphosis in *The Shining*. I call it The Behavioral Bends.

BUT WHY? DOESN'T HE KNOW HE'S SAFE?

The emergence of The Behavioral Bends doesn't mean that your new dog dislikes you or his new surroundings. If anything, it is a sure sign that he really does feel right at home. In his first few weeks, Axel is a little bit off balance: everything has changed in his life. Even though most of these changes are for the better, they represent a whole new set of habits, rules and expectations to which Axel must adjust. In the same way that a new employee is on his best, if most guarded behavior during his early days at his new company, Axel is getting a feel for things. As that new employee becomes more familiar with his new workplace culture and the individual personalities of his colleagues, he may start to let his hair down a little bit. If he is by nature a bully, he may find the office milquetoast and push him around. If he is a defensive person, he will get more comfortable snapping at criticism from his co-workers. If he is a jokester, he may tell inappropriate stories around the water cooler until he is reprimanded by a more sensitive person who doesn't share his sense of humor.

In the case of an adult dog taken out of a shelter, you are dealing with an animal who may have had little prior experience dealing with the type of environment you provide for him in a normal home. No matter how comfortable and accommodating his shelter housing was, it has little in common with a normal pet owner's household. As the days and weeks pass by, Axel feels more and more comfortable asserting himself. If he started out as a shy or aloof dog, you may see that he starts to come out of his shell and begin to bond with his new family. But if he started out as a normal, outgoing animal, you may find yourself wondering exactly what happened when he first shows you the less rosy of his true colors. Unfortunately, we often make things worse for the new arrival by mistakenly assuming that pampering will be rewarded with gratitude. After all, our instinct as dog lovers is to take all of the pressure off of a dog who has come out of a shelter or kennel environment. But that pressure must be decreased gradually, and sometimes even increased if we are to protect the dog we just rescued from needing rescue again!

To truly do justice to your newly adopted friend, you must accept that dogs really do not live in their pasts. Trying to "make up" to Axel for any real or imagined injustice in his prior life may make you feel grand, but it usually only serves to confuse Axel, who would benefit most from cheerful consistency rather than overwhelming pity. A better use of your emotional energy is to think about his most recent life in the shelter. If you are dealing with a modern, well-run organization with a clean, comfortable facility, you'll have to admit that you really aren't breaking Axel out of the Doggy Gulag. If anything, his time in the shelter may have been the first good thing that's happened to him, in Dog terms. To really get this, make a side-by-side list of the differences between life with his shelter caretakers and life in your home. You'll see that with its regular meal and exercise times, familiar faces, and consistent training (if provided), shelter life is calm and predictable. Try to remember that dogs are creatures of habit to the extreme. Because of this trait, the regimented structure of the kennel can give many dogs a sense of security, as long as it is balanced with generous individual attention from the shelter staff. Compared to the freeform existence that awaits him in your home, where he will have more room, days when he sleeps in or stays up late, special treats, trips in the car, and as many visitors and friends as you have, you'll see where the problems can arise.

Going from that relatively uneventful shelter life into the new one is like traveling up from the peace of the ocean's bottom and surfacing at a Jimmy Buffet concert.

Many adopters want to take a few days off to acclimate their new dog to this new life. But this isn't necessarily the answer. As long as you aren't gone for ten hours a day, you can usually jump him into this new schedule without major repercussions. That will be the easiest new change for him to conquer. When you start adding in the new people and places, you begin to court the Behavioral Bends if you don't undertake these introductions conservatively.

None of this is a treatise advocating the hiding away of your new dog or twenty-four hour kenneling. Often, this type of "management" is worse for the dog than his previous life in the shelter, where at least he was getting worked with every day! Nor should anyone from the shelter or rescue group encourage you to bring your new dog everywhere immediately in an attempt to "socialize" him before he even gets to know you. New adopters are often confused by the seemingly contrary advice they get: a behaviorist might prescribe the "dog in the plastic bubble" approach while the local obedience instructor tells you that your brand- new, untrained dog should thoroughly enjoy the unsolicited attention of everything on two legs or four. There is a happy medium for you and Axel which will result in his adaptation into your home. Think of it as a program of decompression: the safest way to avoid the Behavioral Bends.

LET HIM EARN HIS TERRITORY

Most dog experts agree that the proper use of a crate is instrumental in helping a dog adapt to a new situation. There is a lot to be said for restricting your new dog's territory during his first weeks with you. Not only is this the best way to prevent accidents and inappropriate chewing or destruction, it also gives him a clear idea that you are the person who determines the property rights in the home.

As he learns your daily routines, start allowing him a bit more supervised leeway, gradually including all of the territory you wish to share with him. Stay away from the notion that he can have some parts of the house now but not when Aunt Edna comes to visit, or not when you install the new carpets in a couple of weeks. You expect him to be consistent in his good behavior. That means you should be consistent in how you enforce your expectations.

At the first sign of any backsliding (marking things, soiling, destruction or possessive behavior) take back some of the real estate. Waiting for time alone to cure these problems will only result in their becoming long-standing habits rather than momentary mistakes.

KEEP HIM TO YOURSELF AT FIRST

The pride and joy you'll feel when bringing home your new dog is hard to keep quiet. Like many adopters, you may want to celebrate the new arrival by introducing him to everyone in your social circle, taking him for an inaugural spin through the neighborhood, crashing the local puppy playgroup...but hold up for a second. Throwing all of this at your new rescue can turn into a disaster if you undertake it too lightly.

Our hearts can lead us down some tricky roads when it comes to dealing with animals. There is something profound that occurs when we look into those deep brown eyes. We speak of "bonds" between us. We designate the dog as our best friend. And it's all true. The catch is that it isn't all true all at once.

This is especially important to remember if you have adopted a member of a breed which can be suspicious of strangers. But even if you find yourself signing the papers on a cheerful mixed breed who introduced himself with a barrage of dog kisses, remember that even you are a stranger to this new dog, and probably will be for longer than you think. It is a wise and considerate adopter who spends a lot of quality one-on-one time with his new friend before bringing him around to meet the neighbors. Let your dog get to know you and your immediate household members. These are the people who he needs to look to for leadership and reinforcement. The security of the pack is one of a dog's greatest pleasures in life, and it's up to you to make sure that your two-legged pack is well-defined in your dog's eyes. Because a dog is such a physical being, it's also important that he learns all about your tone of voice, your body language, and your level of tolerance for certain things. As this develops, he will trust your judgment and better defer to your direction when you put him in social situations.

It goes both ways: get to know him, too. The writeup on the shelter website only scratches the surface. Axel has much to tell you if you'll only listen and watch. What are his habits, his likes and dislikes? What is his threshold for handling, for pressure, for activity? When does he seem to run out of gas? You can't change or improve any of these things until you know what they look like, when they'll occur, and how he'll communicate them to you. We call this "reading the dog". When you can read your dog, you can predict your dog. When you can predict your dog, you can control him. When you can control him, you can meet the responsibility of letting him meet new people. If he is obedient and responsive, he will make a great impression.

EXPLAINING THROUGH TRAINING

Most shelters and rescue groups place strong emphasis on obedience training for the dogs and adopters involved with their agencies. The fact is that most dogs find themselves in the shelter or rescue system due to "behavior problems" in their last home. Good dogs are made, not born, and most of the "hyper", obnoxious, young adult dogs barking and bouncing behind the kennel gates are good dogs in the rough who are literally crying out for direction. The greatest mistake made by well-meaning adopters is the assumption that their new dog will naturally adapt and understand the rules, and simply settle in as time passes. Opting against formal training because you feel badly for the "rescued" dog is a big step in the wrong direction. In my practice I have seen many adopted dogs whose owners are so indulgent and permissive that the dogs are nearly incorrigible; months and sometimes years have passed as the owners make excuses and wait for the dog to "settle down". For these dogs, the Behavioral Bends never ended: they live in the murk of an indecisive, inconsistent pack, and never realize their true potential. They are held under by the resistance of their well-meaning owners to structure and leadership. If good training is introduced and maintained, the relationship can be salvaged. If not, the owners are cursed with an uncontrollable embarrassment of a dog, and the dog is cursed with never knowing his role in the pack.

It's important to remember that a dog learns whether you teach him or not. The problem is that the untrained dog learns that you are an ineffective leader, and that when you open your mouth, nothing of import comes out. As his threshold for your repeated, increasingly desperate-sounding commands increases, your tolerance for his misbehavior decreases. If this goes on long enough, you will find yourself in the same frustrating standoff that probably landed Axel in the shelter in the first place.

Good, results-oriented obedience training as coached by an experienced, balanced trainer is the hands-down best chance for success. By building your relationship on a common training language, you are accomplishing two important goals. First, you are giving Axel a clear picture of your firm, fair leadership: a necessity in his life as a pack animal. Second, you are learning a system of prevention and control that will have you better prepared for any turbulence in the early stages of your ownership.

BE HUMBLE

This is the hardest part. But it is just as important as any other component of your new relationship with your adopted dog. Some of the most disappointing experiences involving a dog's failure in either his original home or his adopted home are those which occur due to the owner's belief that he knows better than anyone what he needs to do with his new dog. And while the subjective knowledge you can gain about a dog's individual habits and personality is certainly important, it is only half of the equation: the other half is understanding how to deal with those habits or personality traits when they become problematic. This is when the help of a more experienced trainer will help you. But to the stubborn owner who "doesn't need help", there is nothing that he could learn from an outsider.

It happens too much in rescue. The owner of a dog with a problem calls to arrange surrender or return due to the dog's apparently insurmountable behavior problems. Any suggestions by the shelter staff are countered with claims of experience, a tally of the numbers of dogs owned, or the long and impressive history of the last dog that lived with them. Older owners won't be instructed by someone their junior. Younger owners "don't believe in" the advice from an elder. A sensitive owner finds the suggestions too harsh, a less patient owner doesn't want to spend the time trying them in the first place. Regardless of the reasons for the owner's resistance to advice, the end result is uniform: pride, stubbornness or just plain old ego get in the way and a dog is put into a situation which he can't handle.

Think of all the people who give up a dog for chewing things in their house but who "don't believe in" crates. Or the people who have owned four Labrador Retrievers and refuse to believe that their adult adopted stray male Doberman is going to be a wonderful playmate for their neighbor's male German Shepherd. Or the people who think it's "inhumane" to train a dog using anything but cookies but have no problem bringing the dog back to the shelter when the cookies lose their appeal in the face of a more tempting reward (like the kid on the bicycle or the neighbor's miniature Poodle). These are not dog problems, but human problems. How sad that it's the dog who ultimately pays the price.

No matter how many dogs you have known in your life, you are a beginner with this dog. Your past experience has not conferred instant control and expertise in his handling. If you are one to counter the suggestions offered to you by a professional trainer with a claim that you've owned ten dogs, that means that you ascribe some importance to numbers as proof of experience. Then think of this: the person who is trying to help you has probably put their hands on hundreds and hundreds of dogs and is still learning from them. They are not giving you empty information, or just telling you these things so that they can hear themselves talk. They are genuinely trying to help you and your dog find the shortest, safest route to success, as learned from the dogs themselves. This is a belief subscribed to by the most successful professional trainers who have handled thousands of dogs in their careers. Each one is a new experience and is as much a teacher as a student. The best dog trainers have been humbled many times by dogs who tested and found fault with our opinions about the generalities of behavior. Sometimes these are hard lessons, but learning them makes it possible for us to help more dogs than ever succeed. As the adopter of a shelter dog, it is your job to help just one of them. Try to open your mind as well as your heart when it comes to understanding and addressing any problems that arise during his adaptation period.

The Behavioral Bends don't have to be a disaster. Being prepared by understanding and preventing them is more than half the battle. Your new dog has probably gone through much in his life before getting to the happy day you chose him to be yours. With your patience and common sense, perhaps the Bends will be the last crisis he experiences. Then both of you can enjoy the smooth sailing that awaits!