

Resilience: How Stress Interferes in Dogs and Humans

THE CANINE COACH

BY VALERIE BROADWAY



Resilience is defined as the ability to return to being healthy and hopeful after bad things happen. In the movie *Hope Floats* there is a line Sandra Bullock's character's mother, played by Gena Rowlands, says that really resonated with me. It goes something like, "Children are not resilient. They just grow up to be adults with issues." This is one of the things humans and dogs have in common. Puppies who have experienced trauma are likely to grow up to be dogs with behavioral issues.

Trauma changes the way the brain functions by shutting down certain regions of the brain and over-stimulating other areas. Routine high levels of stress cause repeated jolts of adrenaline to be pumped throughout the body. This results in a fight, flight, or freeze response. Dog training cannot happen while dogs are in any of these states. The fight or flight response is recognizable to most people. However, the freeze response can sometimes be confusing. Often, it seems like dogs are just not paying attention or are not able to focus on their handlers. A couple of ways to test to see if dogs are in "freeze" mode is to offer them a favorite treat, or ask them to perform a command they know well such as "sit." If they are in a stressful situation and they absolutely will not take a treat, or perform the command, then they are in freeze mode. They are panicking. In this moment of high stress they are not able to think because the brain has locked up. In this state training is going to be impossible to accomplish.

The earlier the intervention the better the outcome will be for puppies to have a chance to

be normally behaving dogs. It is almost never too late to make a difference in a traumatized animal's life. Every dog is an individual, so it comes down to how the trauma has affected each developing brain and the level of resilience they have within them.

My oldest daughter is the Substance Abuse Prevention Educator for the Surry Co. Health Dept. A couple of months ago she shared with me a webinar about the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study. The study was conducted in 1998 by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente. Over 17,000 adults completed a questionnaire about their childhood experiences. ACEs are defined as serious childhood traumas that result in toxic stress. Toxic stress occurs when a child feels like they have no support or protection around stressful situations. Living in a stressful environment can harm a child's brain.

Severe trauma can be defined in both humans and canines as: 1) physical abuse, 2) neglect, 3) dysfunction in the pack/family unit.

The ACEs questionnaire contains 10 statements that require "yes" or "no" answers about traumatic events that may or may not have occurred during childhood. The study found if the participants had answered yes to at least four of these statements they were much more likely to have had behavioral, physical, and mental health issue in their lifetime. Two thirds of adults score at least one on the ACEs questionnaire. Dr. Robert Anda, co-investigator of the ACEs Study said, "Without a doubt, childhood trauma is the nation's No. 1 public health problem." The quality of life for persons with a score of four or more was usually poor. In the long term, those with high ACEs scores were found to have a reduced lifespan by as much as 20 years when compared to those with lower scores.

The earlier the intervention the better. There are actions that can be taken in order to help the brain to reset and heal. Some of the things involved in helping both children and canines with recovery from adverse experiences are:



screenings of Resilience. They can be reached at carsinitiative@gmail.com.

Other sources related to the ACEs study or the Resilience documentary are:

- Resiliencethemovie.com (movie trailer)
- A Ted Talk by Dr. Nadine Burke-Harris (Dr. Harris is prominently featured in the *Resilience* documentary.)
- Acestoohigh.com (contains the ACEs questionnaire)



- Creating a safe living environment
- Meeting basic needs
- Parents/guardians learning skills and techniques to create less stressful living conditions
- Teaching social and emotional coping skills to the victims

A few weeks after learning about the ACEs study, a documentary called *Resilience* was shown at Central Carolina Community College campuses in Pittsboro and Siler City. The film was an hour long and at the end viewers were given the option to complete the ACEs questionnaire, anonymously. An organization called Chatham Action on Resilience (CARS) will offer future screenings of the movie around the county and have attendees complete the ACEs questionnaire, if they wish. CARS goal is to get an idea of how the population of Chatham County scores. CARS would like to expand awareness and build community conversations about how to address toxic stress and build resilience. CARS will be offering future

- preventchildabusenc.org

On October 3 the United States Senate approved, with a 98-1 vote, H.R. 6, The Support for Patients and Communities Act. Provisions in this legislation align with findings of the ACEs study. The Act was written in response to the nation's opioid crisis. There is a strong correlation between childhood trauma and drug addiction. The next and final stop for this legislation is the President's desk.

It is interesting to realize how similar humans and dogs are when it comes to how both respond to trauma. Prevention and appropriate care for those who are at risk from toxic trauma could certainly go a long way towards making everyone a little more resilient.

Valerie Broadway, the Canine Coach, is a dog trainer and behavioral specialist. For more information, call 919-542-4726 or visit www.caninecoachingservices.com.

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