



Trainer and Behavior Consultant Andrew Hale Shares How to Move Away from Task-Oriented Training, Trauma and PTSD in Dogs, and How Best to Help Troubled Dogs



Trainer and behavior consultant Andrew Hale with his soul dog, Milo. Hale rescued Milo but says that Milo really saved him!

► **You said something once in one of our conversations that intrigued me: “I assume dogs (and people) that I meet have trauma.” Could you expand on that and explain what you mean?**

Yes, I make that assumption with many of the dogs I have met. Sometimes that trauma can be obvious and caused by known events in the dog’s history. Most caregivers (owners) can recognize the probability of trauma developing from the certain events, like deliberate cruelty or being attacked by another dog. However, trauma can be triggered by events that are unknown and often unseen by the caregiver. Given that trauma, to whatever extent, is often a contributor to many behavior challenges, it cannot hurt to presume that it is a factor. Following a trauma-informed process will not do any harm, and indeed underpins a dog-centered approach anyway since this approach seeks to learn more of the dog’s emotional truth. Not starting with this assumption, however, risks missing something very fundamental to that animal’s emotional experience.

► **You have a background in human psychology.**

How do you use that knowledge to help owners communicate or feel a connection with their dog, especially a troubled dog?

Understanding the psychology of judgment and expectations is so important when trying to help a caregiver explore the support and care needs of their dog. *Perception is everything.* What the caregiver thinks is the issue will very much dictate their perspective. That perception can sometimes be 180 degrees away from the actual challenges faced by the dog. For example, many caregivers will view the behavior of the dog on the usual “good to bad” continuum, which supports the notion of reward and punishment. This, in turn, can promote a more “task-orientated” approach to these challenges. For example: “My dog’s barking is bad (the judgment). I must stop my dog’s barking (the task).” A task-oriented approach might be to punish the barking or reward the dog when it’s not barking. But what about the dog? What triggered the barking in the first place? What relief might that dog be seeking?

Understanding that the caregiver will likely be making these quick judgments based on their view of how a dog *should* behave is crucial. We need to find a way to connect through emotional experience, so they can relate to their dog’s care and support needs. This shifts the focus away from a task-orientated approach to a care-orientated one.

The key here is to understand the abstract nature of the emotional experience and use that as the main point of reference. To do this I invite the caregiver to share their thoughts and feelings first, before even meeting the dog. This way I get an insight into their world view and belief system and get to hear their emotional truth. They will often share feelings of anger, embarrassment, frustration, guilt, etc.

The next step is to talk about the emotional experience in a neutral way, discussing the importance of cognitive processing and the role of the nervous system. I use analogies for all these—such as the “bucket analogy” for stress (an empty bucket represents the nervous system and the water in it represents the amount of stress a person or animal is carrying). I can then go back and discuss their

emotional experience again with them, referencing these principles and analogies (for example, “your bucket must have been filling quickly in that situation”). Now we have a vocabulary and perspective we can apply to the dog when I meet him or her for observation. I can use the same language, analogies, and references, which helps the caregiver connect their emotional experience with that of their dog. This encourages more empathy and supports the care-orientated approach. Once the caregiver’s perception changes, so does their ability to offer the care and support the dog really needs.

► **What are three important ways owners can help a dog find relief from their stressors (in general terms, since every stressor and every dog is unique)?**

First, we need solid observations. We need to be aware of our own judgments and biases and allow the dog the time and space they need to give us the information we need to support them.

Second, we need to look for general ways to offer relief that might not be directly associated with the central challenges. For example, making sure the dog has a good diet, is getting enough rest, etc. I ask all my clients to look at their dog over a seven-day cycle, not just one day—thinking about the activities and everyday stressors that come up during that week. We should always look to remove as many of the avoidable triggers as possible, or to compensate for them by allowing adequate decompression time after exposure. Sometimes that is not measured in hours, but rather days and weeks!

Finally, once the core triggers have been identified, including physiological or cognitive aspects, as many methods as possible to provide relief need to be found. That might mean removing exposure to a trigger for a period of time or offering the dog more time and space to process the trigger (giving them more of a chance to come up with a self-regulated response).

The biggest takeaways here are to slow things down, learn from the dog, and allow a structured process for piecing the puzzle together.

► **Do you believe that dogs—like people—can suffer from PTSD? What are some causes of PTSD in dogs?**

It is important to note that I am not a neurobiologist. Also, it is important to note that we still have a lot to learn about trauma in humans, let alone understanding the causes, impacts, and care needed for dogs. However, I do believe there is enough understanding of trauma to recognize the severe impact of certain events and experiences on the emotional well-being of dogs. To this end, I do believe dogs are capable of suffering a version of PTSD, and indeed I always presume trauma when working with dogs demonstrating challenging behaviors. Following a trauma-informed process is really the same as having a dog-centered care approach anyway. As with many humans, most dogs will have experienced forms of trauma during their lives.

The causes of trauma for some dogs can be clear, for example, abuse by a human, being kept in stressful conditions, being deprived of any of the “five freedoms” (freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain, injury, or disease, freedom to express normal behavior, and freedom from fear and distress). It is also worth considering that trauma can also come from more subtle origins (especially those relating to deprivation of the “freedom to express normal behavior”). For example, the dog could be trying to communicate a need through its behavior, and if that behavior is consistently challenged through aversive means, or even replaced by another behavior using reinforcement, the relief they were seeking will never be found and the situation could be traumatic. It’s in these situations that the operant bias can often shift the outcome in favor of the human’s needs at the expense of the dogs. For the dog, I would think that could be quite traumatic!

► **What are some of the top things humans do that cause stress for modern dogs?**

I think the biggest stressor that most dogs experience is not having their care and support needs listened to. We have created such a heavy reliance and focus on task-oriented behavior changing and management that we allow little time for the richness of our dogs’ attempts at communicating their needs to be seen. The notion of “obedience” creates a real blind spot—when a dog does not “do as they are told,” the task-orientated focus can easily lead to the dog being labeled as disobedient, naughty, dominant, ignorant, difficult, etc. Sadly, the list of labels is a long one. Without being shown how to be more aware of the dog’s ability to comply, the caregiver can get sucked into a harmful cul-de-sac of simply trying to get compliance.

More generally, there is a crisis of dog owners lacking awareness. The dominance model does not help, but the lack of awareness of how dogs communicate, the relief they seek, the role of physiology (especially pain), etc., is probably the largest part of the problem.