



Trainer and Behavior Consultant Lee Desmarais Shares Her Personal Experience with a Dog We Couldn't Help



Trainer and Behavior Expert Lee Desmarais shown in a calm moment with a troubled young dog she adopted from a client. This dog was beyond anyone's help as she had a brain tumor that severely affected her behavior. Neither trainers nor veterinarians can "fix" a dog that is dangerous to live with because of a massive health problem.

► **You have years of experience working with all kinds of behavior issues in all breeds of dogs. And in that work, you have had to counsel clients through the heart-wrenching decision of behavioral euthanasia. And then it happened to one of your own dogs. Tell us how you met this dog as a puppy and the behavior you observed in the young dog.**

I was originally hired by Winnie's guardians for puppy training when she was four months old. She was an eager little learner and a joy to work with, but from the very first session her owners spoke about her "puppy biting." I never saw it personally during our 10 training sessions, but I did see, as I often do, the evidence of it—bloody scratches on her owner's forearms. We covered all the common responses to that behavior: make sure she is getting enough sleep, make sure she has enough oral stimulation and intellectual opportunity, keep her arousal levels down, no over-stimulating play or touching, keep exercise reasonable to prevent any physical discomfort. You name it—we covered it.

For a while the interventions in place seemed to reduce the biting to some extent. We taught her to go to "place," building distance and duration. We taught her a solid "leave it" to distract her from the biting. Both skills were helpful to redirect her (sometimes) but by the time that Winnie was six months old her owners were still at a loss, and, to complicate matters, she had



Winnie had a good puppy life, but a brain tumor changed her behavior. She began to exhibit aggression, including biting people. Sometimes there are such severe physical, emotional, or genetic issues that the kindest thing we can do as owners is the hardest—to gently let them go.

developed separation anxiety. They were not only unable to crate her, but they also couldn't leave her alone at all. Someone always needed to be home with her. (Sadly, this is a common theme with many COVID puppies whose owners were once home all the time.)

Winnie's owners felt that they had followed all the recommendations and strategies and had done their homework consistently day in and day out (and they did, they were very committed students), but that she just wasn't a good fit for their home. I offered to adopt her if they ever wanted to give her up. One Sunday afternoon, I got a frantic text message from Winnie's owner that she had attacked his wife. Winnie had been laying quietly on the couch beside her and suddenly jumped up and started biting her forearm. They were unable to redirect her verbally; they had hit a wall. The very next day, I picked Winnie up and brought her home.

► **Sometimes owners tell trainers that their dog “bit them out of the blue.” That is what happened with this young dog. There were no warning signs or stressors. Can you describe the first few times she bit you?**

First, I would like to say that in all the years I have been working with behavior cases, I have never been bitten by a dog, much less one of my own. I clearly recall the first time I experienced Winnie's behavior—my partner and I were sitting on the couch one evening watching TV and Winnie was laying between us chewing on a chew toy. She suddenly leapt up and came toward me air snapping. I jumped up to put distance between us and she continued to come at me, and then just as suddenly as it started, it stopped. It lasted about 30 seconds. Over the next several weeks I slept on the couch with her at night because she couldn't be alone. Each day I worked with her on her separation anxiety and spent a great deal of time observing everything Winnie did, collecting data. Her eruptions continued to increase and were happening randomly throughout the day. I had never seen this behavior before. She would go offline; she was just simply not reachable during these episodes. Even though she was looking right at me, she wasn't seeing me at all.

► **Can you briefly share with us some of the many things you did to help Winnie, including working with a veterinarian?**

I have a very large, enclosed playground for my dogs. It has a natural landscape with a sensory garden, physical structures, a pool, and lots of things to explore and engage with. We spent hours every day just being together in that space the first couple of weeks, but I quickly saw that it was too overstimulating for her to be in that space and the attacks were starting to happen there, too. We took daily decompression walks on a long line: Winnie led, and I followed. She was curious, fearless, and up for anything. But unless she was sleeping for the night, she had a very difficult time settling and she would quite easily become over-aroused, so I spent a lot of time using Dr. Karen Overall's Relaxation Protocol and doing scent work. But it didn't help.

I was completely beside myself. The attacks from her were increasing, becoming more and more violent, and lasting for longer periods of time. My vet considered that it might be an absence seizure disorder given the nature of onset and cessation, so, taking the most conservative approach, Winnie was put on a seizure medication. It made no difference, so it was discontinued after a few days. I started doing some research on rage syndrome. I had read about it briefly years before. I had never seen it personally, and knew it was rare, usually caused by a brain disorder such as a tumor. I convinced myself that was probably not what I was seeing; but nevertheless, I wound up going down a rabbit hole. Over a period of days, the more I read, the more I was convinced that was indeed what Winnie's issue was. I then reached out to a highly qualified veterinary behaviorist; she concurred that it indeed sounded like rage syndrome and said that only an MRI could tell us what was going on in Winnie's head.

► **Please explain the depth of injury this dog was capable of.**

All in all, Winnie made contact with my body approximately 18 times, breaking skin with puncture wounds and scratches, not including countless attempts and lots of air snapping. As fast as I could block her, she came at my face, abdomen, and extremities. Often leaving the room and closing the gate was the only option to remain unharmed. These episodes not only grew more frequent, but became longer in duration, and being alone with her had become a safety issue. The last time she went into a rage, we were alone, and she had me pinned in my dogs' playground against the chain-link fence. I had nowhere to go, and the only protection was a plastic lawn chair, which I used to stave her off, but even then, she was able to bite my ankles and ripped the chair right out of my hands. So, what was she capable of? I shudder to think.

► **The final, most difficult decision you made for her was behavioral euthanasia. It did turn out that she suffered from a debilitating medical condition that was the root cause of her aggressive behavior. What was that condition and how was it discovered?**

An MRI revealed a tumor in her brain stem and a lesion in her limbic system.

► **This case illustrates that even the most proficient behavior expert cannot fix a brain issue. Perhaps her story can help heal the pain of this choice for some dog owners, as it is clear we could not use behavior modification or medicine to stop Winnie's aggression. What words of encouragement can you share with anyone considering the painful choice of behavioral euthanasia?**

People struggle with euthanasia in general, even when there are clear-cut reasons for the decision. But it is much more difficult when it's behavioral because behavior isn't as concrete and doesn't seem to be a "real" enough reason. People feel like "oh, there must be something else I can try that just hasn't been tried yet." But sometimes there isn't. Sometimes it's bad genetics. Sometimes it's too many bad experiences. Sometimes it's a loose wire that is never going to connect. Sometimes it's a brain tumor. And sometimes it is the kindest most humane gift we can give that animal—freedom from being a prisoner in their own head. Whatever the case is, no matter what the reason, it is always a heavy decision.

I often tell clients who struggle with this decision the words from an excellent book called *Facing Farewell* by Julie Reck, DVM: "All creatures have a day of birth and a day of death. Humans, in contrast to animals, know they will die someday. Humans uniquely perceive a straight timeline between birth and death and strive for the timeline to be as long as possible. Like us, animals are given a day of birth and a day of death, but unlike us their lifespan is not linear, but circular. Initially they are young, then they mature, and with time they age. Pets do not fear any stages of life and receive the onset of a gray muzzle and stiff joints with grace."