

DO HANDLER STRESS LEVELS AFFECT THEIR SAR DOG?

BY SUSAN BULANDA

While this article focuses on search and rescue (SAR) dogs, it also applies to all working dogs who react to handler stress the same way. Training a dog for SAR is stressful for the handler. There is always the question of whether or not the dog will “get it.” And if he does, how reliable will he be? Then, there are the certification tests to contend with. Many dogs work well in training but then fail their certification tests. If these hurdles are overcome, the search itself is a high stress situation. Fear that the team was called too late or that dog will not find the missing person/clues is always in the mind of the handler. Of course, we all know that the weather or circumstances can make it impossible or nearly impossible for the dog to detect scent, but realizing that does not ease the stress. So, does our stress level affect our dog’s performance?

According to a study conducted by researchers at the Linköping University, our stress level is mirrored by our dogs. A contributing factor is the type of relationship between the dog and owner. The researchers found that hunting dogs were affected by their owner’s stress but not as much as the herding breeds, which had an even higher reaction to their owner’s stress levels. Interestingly, the ancient breeds showed less correlation between themselves and their owners. This may be because the ancient breeds have not been bred to work with their handlers at the same level as the hunting and herding breeds. Ancient breeds are dogs such as livestock guarding breeds, huskies, etc.

SAR dogs have a unique bond with their owners, as do other working dogs, often more so than dogs that are pets. Working dogs learn to read their handlers almost to the point where they can predict their owner’s behavior. We cannot hide our feelings or our stress level from our dogs. When a search call comes in, our adrenalin soars and our dogs can detect it immediately. It doesn’t matter if we appear to be calm, cool and collected, you can’t fool the dog. This is because our emotions change the chemistry in our body and dogs can smell it the second it changes. Because dogs are very observant, they connect the activity associated with the change in our scent.

When a handler takes their dog for their certification tests, the handler may be very nervous and fearful, which causes an extremely high stress level. By the same token, the handler’s stress level may be much lower the second time the test is taken, which may be why the dog will pass the second time and not the first. It is not the dog that is the issue, but the handler’s stress level.

Look at it from the dog’s point of view: everything seems like a normal training session except for the handler’s reaction to the situation. Keep in mind that

the dog most likely has not been on searches at this point so has not experienced the elevated adrenalin or stress level that the handler has when being tested. Therefore, the certification experience for the dog is different. The dog would not understand why but would recognize that it is not positive like regular training.

Because dogs recognize our stress levels, it is important to try and turn the stress into a positive instead of a negative as well as reduce our stress levels. The most important and meaningful way to lower handler stress is to trust your dog. If you trust your dog,

the fear that your dog will fail is significantly reduced. The only way to learn to trust your dog is to work with the dog to the point where you can read your dog as well as he can read you. By training continually in every possible situation, you will learn what your dog can do.

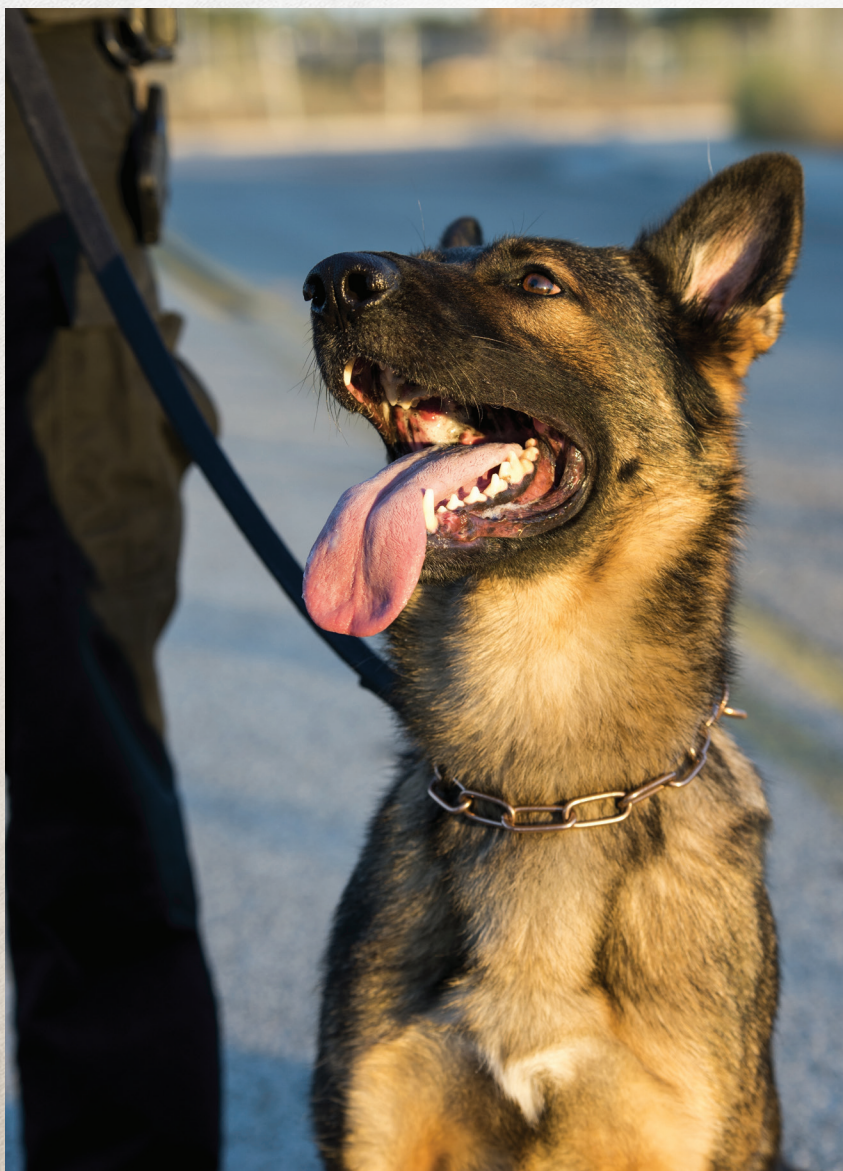
For this to be successful, the handler must give his dog the freedom to do his job. A handler who does not trust his dog will micromanage the dog and that inhibits the dog's ability to work to his best level. Recent studies show that dogs are much more intelligent than anyone suspected.

Once they know what the job is, they can analyze the situation so that they can do their job to the best of their ability. By training in all situations and weather conditions, the dog learns how to work in those situations.

I do not like to use my experiences as an example, but in this case, I want to share an incident to illustrate my point. We received a call for a missing veteran. The man lived in a veteran's facility that had three buildings located on a large cul-de-sac. There was constant traffic around the cul-de-sac, people walking, cars, buses, etc. The man had been missing for three days before anyone realized that he was gone. The weather had been in the mid-80's all three days and was sunny and dry. When we were called, I asked why the management had not called the local police who had a dog. I was told that the police would not come out because they felt that there was no way a dog could find the scent of the missing man after three days in those weather conditions.

When I arrived at the scene, I scented my dog, Scout, on an article of clothing. He promptly led me around the cul-de-sac to a building. Then he indicated that the man had sat on a picnic bench located on the open porch of the building. Next, he indicated that the man had gone into the building. Scout took me through the building, ignoring all of the doors leading to other rooms and led me to the back door of the building where he continued to track the man down a path to the back gate. The scent was actually in the weeds alongside of the concrete path.

As it turned out, Scout was 100% correct. The man had gone exactly where Scout indicated and walked into the neighboring town, took a bus to go visit his daughter.



Initially, because of the age of the track, the contamination in the area and the weather, I was not sure if Scout could follow the scent. But I had learned never to underestimate any dog and always give them a chance. It was prior training under similar conditions that allowed Scout to work out the problem. It also freed me from the fear that he might not be able to solve the problem because I knew what he was capable of doing and that he would give it his all.

Working in all conditions will teach a handler to trust his dog and accept that if the dog cannot do the job, it is most likely the circumstances, not the dog's inability. By reducing the fear of failure, you reduce your stress as

well as the dog's stress. Handler stress can become a signal to the dog that he is going to do something he loves. When the call comes in and your adrenalin shoots up, your dog will learn that he gets to go on a search. In order for this to have a positive reaction in the dog, he must have a high drive to work.

This means that the dog must be highly motivated to search. This can be a tricky thing to develop because it depends on a number of factors. The dog himself must be a working minded dog. This is not something that is necessarily breed related. I owned a Havanese that I trained to detect toxic mold. All nine and a half pounds of her was a work-

ing dynamo. There are individuals in working breeds that do not want to work and there is little you can do to make them love or want to do the job.

The next factor is that the training must be positive; not just the training methods, but the experience itself must be fun. It helps if the dog has a natural instinct to find because then you are fulfilling what the dog feels he needs to do, which will give him a high level of satisfaction. This leads to the next element that is critical, and that is motivation.

A dog will only work beyond the call of duty if he is sincerely motivated. If the dog's instincts are to find things and SAR work fills that need, the dog's motiva-



tion will be very high. This is one reason why some of the hunting, herding and working breeds excel in SAR. Breeds that are bred to work independently typically are not reliable SAR dogs because SAR work does not fulfil their instincts. Of course, I am making broad generalizations and each breed and individual dog should be independently evaluated.

Frequent practice in as many conditions as possible will lower handler stress and therefore lower the dog's stress. SAR dog training sessions should not put pressure on the handler and dog, but be a time when the handler and dog learn together. Every handler must realize that their dog will not always do well in training. The dog or the handler could have a bad day. The training environment may be new to the dog and he has to learn by trial and error how to work the problem, which may take a number of practices over time for

the dog to do this. If the handler recognizes that the dog may not always do well, it will lower handler stress and anxiety, therefore the dog will feel more positive.

I will give you another example. When I was quite young, I was training and handling a German Shepherd for friends to compete in AKC obedience trials. The dog had an almost perfect score until she got to the stand for examination exercise, which she failed. I was deeply disappointed but I tried to hide my feelings from the dog. However, the dog knew how I felt and for a long time she would not do the stand for examination exercise. It took a lot of work on my part to get her over it.

The comradery in the unit should be such that everyone would enjoy having a picnic together. This goes a long way to eliminate handler stress. By training the SAR dog in a non-stressful and friendly environment, the

handler can build the dog's motivation, increase the dog's drive, and make the job fun for the dog by fulfilling his needs. This is what makes a good SAR dog and a reliable SAR dog lowers handler stress. The most important benefit of varied and frequent training teaches the handler to trust his dog. Trusting your dog also lowers stress. 🐾

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