

FEATURE



ANY GIVEN SUNDAY

Off-leash dogs turned a morning walk into a trauma-filled experience for my dogs and myself

By Rachel Brix, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, FFCP (Trainer)

Apache shown at home enjoying his tennis ball. You can see the healing stitches where he was attacked during a Sunday walk.



Apache recovers after he was attacked by two larger unleashed dogs. Apache was muzzled at the time of the attack. His veterinarian lost count of the number of stitches it took to put his wounds together.

The vet who operated on Apache had worked numerous abuse and dogfighting cases and said his was one of the worst wounds she had ever seen. Several layers of skin and tissue protruded from his chest and neck and had to be stitched, one by one, back together. She said she could see his arteries and veins pulsing, and had the injury been even a fraction worse he would not have survived: he would have bled out before I could've even gotten him to the clinic.

Like so many Sundays before, we'd headed out for our morning walk. Sunny and mild, as many summer mornings in northern Michigan are, we had several different routes we'd take depending on which way Apache and Emmie lead me. That Sunday morning they'd pulled me toward the multiuse trails. We meandered through the neighborhood to the trail-head, and I saw a car parked in the grass on the playground, which was unusual, but I figured it was a cyclist or another dog walker who had the same idea we did. No sooner had we headed the opposite way when I heard the jangling of a single collar, yet out of the woods came three unleashed dogs unaccompanied by a human.

Within a single deep breath, they closed 100 yards. I tried to speak calmly, but before I could squeak out, How is every-body today? or something like that, the 60-pound female and 80-pound male were both nose-to-nose with 45-pound Apache. All three dogs were stiff and staring. No ritualized aggression: in a blink the male had Apache by the neck and chest area, clamped down, shaking his head, ripping, while the female simultaneously mauled Apache's head and the other side of his neck. Apache wears a muzzle: he couldn't defend himself. His only defense was to not go down. He was screaming.

I was also helpless. Panicked, the only thing I could think to do was kick the male in his ribs as hard as I could and stomp on his back, but I felt like I was kicking a cloud with twigs for legs. To me he appeared unfazed. It was just me and the three tangled dogs. I'd completely lost track of Emmie; at some point I obviously dropped her leash because she wasn't involved. An eternity passed before a woman appeared, running toward us repeatedly yelling Stop! She then started hitting her dogs with the leashes she'd been carrying.

After what seemed like hours but was probably a few minutes, the dogs abruptly stopped the attack. Were they tired of trying to get Apache to succumb? Had they had enough of the kicking and hitting and yelling? Was it divine intervention? Luck? My eyes darted around for Emmie, and she and the third exceedingly small dog, the one wearing the jangling collar, were by the edge of the woods, sniffing together. A strangely serene moment amid intense trauma.

The woman managed to corral her dogs over to what had been her car in the grass and left saying she'd be right back, that she just lived around the corner. Apache took off, loping. I didn't remember taking off his harness, leash, or muzzle and had no idea where they were. Frozen with shock and indecision I was petrified to see him completely naked, injured (to what extent I had no idea) unmuzzled and running away. I sat down on the ground, scraped my voice out of my stomach and called to him as calmly and softly as I could. He turned and came to me in what seemed like slow motion. It was the first time I remembered breathing.

He had a cantaloupe-sized gaping wound on his chest and neck area and numerous Level 4 bites to his head, nape and crest. Immediately I called the emergency vet. I had to trust the stranger would be back. I had no one close by to call, and I was too far away from home to carry him even if I could have. And there was Emmie. Apache seemed calm and extremely cooperative but not in shock.

The woman did come right back and drove the three of us the half-mile home. I quickly wrapped his chest, put both dogs in my car and met the vet at the clinic. The main wound, which spanned his neck and chest, was much more serious than it first appeared, it was more like two cantaloupe's worth of a tear and deep. So very deep. She told me these types of wounds "can go either way" and we'd need to monitor for necrosis. She was amazed he was alive and said how "tough" he was.

Chances are you and your clients have come upon unleashed dogs, perhaps quite often. Maybe the humans have been responsible and leashed their dogs or successfully called them off. But more likely than not you've heard the "Oh, don't worry, he's friendly!" line or seen frantic owners scrambling, chasing, grabbing and yelling attempting to corral their dogs with varying degrees of success. Or

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maybe you've run across those who've made no attempts to contain their dogs expecting the situation will "work itself out" and simply not caring whether it does, or taking for granted that it will.

Ideally everyone either leashes their dogs or have a great recall, but that's not the reality. I'm not opposed to off-leash dogs, but I am concerned about the epidemic of untrained off-leash dogs. The responsibility for more comprehensive off-leash education falls squarely on us as trainers, especially since confrontations and altercations with strange dogs have the potential to cause emotional and physical trauma. Even if there is no macro trauma, a single devastating event, micro trauma (i.e., being repeatedly approached or even molested by strange dogs) can have permanent and devastating effects.

Effects of Trauma

Trauma refers to physical injuries or emotional distress resulting from an accident, injury, or an overwhelming event, which can disrupt a dog's ability to cope, decrease confidence and interfere with his ability to think and learn. Trauma causes emotional and behavioral issues including chronic anxiety, hypervigilance, avoidance of certain people, places, or situations, sleep disturbances, fear of being alone, decreased interest in a favorite activity or aggression. As Melissa McMath Hatfield, CBCC-KA, CDBC, explains, "the effects from acute aggressive attacks could make a dog more fearful and submissive, or it can make a dog who is already prone to aggressive behaviors more aggressive."

After the attack Apache demonstrably became more hypervigilant and reactive on leash walks but displayed his usual behavior off leash through our fence with the appeasing neighbor puppy (a large unneutered male). His chronic anxiety seemed to stay about the same, but his noise sensitivity returned with more intensity. Many behavioral experts now agree dogs can also suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and not just working or military dogs. Dogs can experience PTSD and chronic PTSD and associated symptoms immediately following the traumatic event.

Overall, according to Hatfield, "we should expect that any dog who

has experienced a physical or emotional trauma should expect some physical and/or emotional fallout. Each reaction will be different according to the individual's emotional state at the time of the trauma, the emotional stability of the dog and level of [his] past experiences and type of trauma." Apache had already experienced much physical trauma in his life evidenced by numerous scars and his ripped off-and-sewn-back-on ear. He also suffered much emotional trauma while in a rural shelter in Arkansas. Besides being distinctly devoid of any training or enrichment programs during his 986-day tenure, his reactivity toward humans escalated to aggression, and it was met with punishment including deprivation and extreme extended periods of isolation. And those are only the events I can confirm.

Laura Donaldson, CDBC, KPA CTP, a certified trauma professional, supports, "micro trauma or little tiny events, daily events, as I call them 'hiding in plain sight', that accumulate over a period of time, but cumulatively, they can be just as devastating as macro trauma and they are certainly just as real... Bessel van der Kolk, one of the world's great trauma specialists, said after you've been traumatized you live in a different world, and that is true whether it's macro trauma or micro trauma."

Apache has always shown symptoms of trauma, such as hypervigilance, being easily startled, and refusal to play or abrupt stoppages in play. He can behave aggressively toward people, which is why he's muzzled in public. He'd made some progress over the years with his anxiety and other behavioral concerns, but we've also had setbacks, and then the attack. But he's always been resilient even though he sometimes clearly struggles.

I'm not the only one amazed by his fortitude. At our most recent meeting with Dr. Karen Overall, our veterinary behaviorist who's well-versed in Apache's history, she was surprised I was only asking for a review of his medication protocol; she thought I was going to tell her he'd succumb and that he was "broken." This shocked me. Although I'd wondered how the attack would affect him, I never considered he would become despondent, unable to function. Or maybe I just didn't want to believe that had been a distinct possibility. But not all dogs are Apache.



Apache celebrates his birthday. Despite the trauma, he appears to have recovered both physically and mentally from the attack.

I'm so fortunate and grateful they didn't go after Emmie, as she would have suffered a much worse physical fate since she has a compromised femur from unknown macro trauma prior to 8 weeks old. Now 12 years old, she's still thriving having had rehab, platelet-rich plasma (PRP) treatments, ongoing therapy and pain management, but she would not have been able to withstand the brute strength of the other two dogs and absolutely would've been taken down. Most dogs probably would have. But she was still directly involved in the trauma.

In her paper "Dogs Who Witness Trauma," Dr. Teresa Tyler explores whether dogs are empathetic toward other dogs. Citing much research, and her own observations pointing to the affirmative, Dr. Tyler calls for more research into witnessing conspecific suffering (2022). As a witness to Apache's distress, Emmie's emotional health also needs support. Even though she's always clearly been dog selective, she has become reactive to nearly all dogs on some level since the attack. And as a human witness and participant in the trauma, I'm still searching to understand its effects on me. I know I feel tremendous remorse for not being able to protect Apache when he needed me.

Trauma compromises the ability to feel safe, and regaining a sense of safety is fundamental to healing. Since safety is such a critical and core need, it's paramount to healing from trauma. Deep safety, as Donaldson defines it, is "an internal sense the world is safe [and the dog is] safe in it and as partners with our dogs it's our responsibility to create and sustain an environment where that can happen." Donaldson believes "[deep safety is the] foundation, and everything starts with that. Until the dog can experience this internalized visceral deep safety not much else is going to happen in terms of healing from trauma."

Healing from Trauma

Apache had scores of stitches—so many the vet stopped counting. He had a drain tube in for a week and was on a handful of oral and topical medications. And while his flesh was healing, the focal point had to be his emotional and mental recovery, whatever that might look like. Initially, Dr. Overall indicated he'd likely have trouble sleeping through the night, and if that were the case, we'd address it. He didn't. I was extremely glad, but not all that surprised. Apache's superpower is grit. He wouldn't have survived all the adversity in his life—or this attack—without it.

Healing from trauma is not one-size-fits-all, as Hatfield explains: "Dogs are like people in that if a person who is naturally shy or lacks self-confidence has experienced trauma, recovery may take longer than the person or dog who [is] confident [and] emotionally balanced...if the dog had a healthy and productive life pre-trauma, he would generally have a greater chance of recovery. Remember though, what might be traumatic to one person or dog may not be anything more than an uncomfortable event that is quickly put behind them for another. Recovery rates depend on temperament, personality, physical health, past experiences, relationship with humans and type of living environment."

According to Donaldson, four elements are needed to heal from trauma: deep safety, agency, a strong social support network and no coercion, pointing out "that includes positive reinforcement coercion that includes pressure for the dog to heal before they're ready. For example, instituting a robust counterconditioning desensitization program [risks] traumatizing and overwhelming the dog."

Healing trauma isn't synonymous with being curable: trauma is permanent. As Donaldson explains, "I don't use the rhetoric of cure with trauma. That doesn't mean we can't move through it, but trauma is something your body never forgets, but we can see it and not have it overwhelm us. That is the best outcome. Because most people when [they say cure they mean] it's gone [and it's] never coming back, and that is just not the way trauma works." Furthermore, the approach to helping a dog heal largely "depends on the dog in front of you, the level of the emotional overwhelm. Slower is better, you cannot force healing from trauma; that has to come from within the dog."

I didn't know what to do during the attack, and I certainly didn't know what to do afterward. Normalcy seemed like the "right" thing, but it didn't feel right. Instead, I felt compelled to do something to counteract what felt like devastation — to strengthen our bond that felt strained, violated. I followed my gut. And maybe my guilt.

Eight days after the attack we went on our annual trip we'd planned five months prior. Our vacations always include our dogs

and dog-friendly activities— and fenced-in yards— and this year it was only a little over an hour away. We spent the week, and Apache's birthday, being silly, having fun and being together. He had a great time, and most importantly he was in good humor. We abandoned our planned woodsy hikes in favor of sticking close to the cabin with a few sight-seeing drives and found the perfect spot to get out and walk: a lakeshore right along the roadside where he and Emmie could wade in the lake and dredge up driftwood with only cars and birds in the backdrop.

The dog in front of me was Apache, and Apache had demonstrated his resilience and insatiable desire to play since the day I'd met him eight years before as an adolescent. By the second day at the cabin, he was running (probably too fast) and playing fetch (his favorite). He was trying to drag around big sticks (under close supervision) and cuddling and watching movies and eating birthday cake. For us, and for Apache, it fit. Whatever the dogs wanted to do or not do was the order of every day; and Apache's only limitation was us trying to be mindful of his stitches and that he didn't overdo it.

While I don't think our trip was a panacea for his healing, spending a week together, a quality week, the three of us and my partner (Apache's other favorite human) just having fun and loving each other, was exactly what we needed. As Donaldson concludes, "When you're dealing with trauma you have to throw a lot of conventional wisdom out the window because it's not helpful." I know this approach wouldn't work for every dog (or maybe even any other dog), but it worked for Apache and Emmie.

Offense vs. Defense

We were on a playground at a trailhead. None of the numerous neighbors, tucked securely in their houses a stone's throw away, came out to help. Later I wondered how many of them bore witness and what it looked like from the safety of their homes.

In the moment, everything I knew about dogfights was buried somewhere, unable to be retrieved. Later I wondered about the wheelbarrow method. May have worked if another human had been readily available, but in an open area keeping the dogs away would've been challenging. Break stick? Possibly, had I had one, I could've used it as a weapon if I was able to get and keep both dogs away from a bloodied Apache and him away from them. What I am convinced would not have worked was my citronella spray I carry a lot of times, which had come in handy before when a dog had approached and started molesting a muzzled Apache. I

was able to get the dog square in the eyes and send him running, but that dog's intentions were different from these two dogs.

Dog sociability is a spectrum, and most dogs are either dog tolerant or dog selective, and some even dog aggressive: a small number of adult dogs are truly dog social. So which dogs should and shouldn't be off leash? In most states, including here in Michigan, dogs must be on leash in most public places, but I see more dogs off leash than I do on leash regardless of what state I'm in. I've encountered very few humans who can call their dogs off. I've often given clients this flow chart, created by dog trainer Jenny Williams, as a great resource that playfully yet poignantly illustrates decision-making of whether to leash or let loose: <https://notesfromadogwalker.com/2013/11/16/should-i-leash-my-dog-flowchart/> (Dolce 2013). Unfortunately, our clients frequently wish their dogs were social butterflies and this can lead to off leash tragedies.

Of course, there are many emotional and behavioral benefits to having dogs well trained off leash. Conversely, untrained off-leash dogs not only present issues for other dogs and humans, but also themselves as they can be at risk in unfamiliar (and even familiar) landscapes. My clients are sometimes surprised they haven't previously given some of these any thought:

- Vehicles
- Hunters
- Wildlife
- Environmental hazards
- Property owners
- Other dogs
- Liabilities (i.e., knocking over a child, senior citizen, disabled person)
- Anyone who doesn't want to be approached by a strange dog

Additionally, teaching body language as standard practice is essential. Our clients might only be on the lookout for obvious warning signs: snarling, snapping, growling, baring teeth, lunging. Apache's assailants didn't show overt signs of attack. Much like Apache, their signals were stiffening and intense silence and stare: within seconds the attack began.

Apache, and many of our dogs, live and are trying to function in a human-centric world having experienced various types of traumas. Most of us know people whose dogs have been attacked by other dogs, and we have worked with dogs who

"I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it."

– Maya Angelou



Other ways to protect yourself and your dog:

- **Citronella spray.** My usual go-to. It has the intended effect without the harmful qualities of pepper spray. After the attack, friends recommended I carry pepper or even bear spray. I suggested the same to them
- **Walking stick.** It can be used as protection; depending on the shape maybe a break stick.
- **Handful of treats.** Chucking these at an incoming dog may prove helpful if the dog's intentions are friendly, and you're trying to shield your dog from approaching canines.

Full disclosure: I carry both spray and a knife now. Right after it happened, and since I have my CPL (Concealed Pistol License), I'd seriously considered carrying my gun. The officer who'd come to the house so I could file my report said I'd have been well within my rights to use it. These dogs had been loose before our attack, and the woman had been warned and cited. This time she was cited again. She'd returned to my house later that day and wrote me a check for my vet bill and said her dogs had never behaved this way before. The dogs were not ordered to be euthanized, but my FOIAs (Freedom of Information Act) have revealed she's so far complied with the mandates set forth in the Potentially Dangerous Dogs ordinance as required by the police chief. Both dogs are supposed to pass the Canine Good Citizen test (or equivalent) by the time this writing is published. I hold no grudges, but I do fear what will happen next time those dogs are loose. I no longer live in that area.

At the End of the Day

As trainers we owe it to children, families, dogs and the public to ensure our off-leash training programs include serious consideration of having dogs off leash responsibly and what that means— and why it's so important. Although the violence and ferocity of Apache's attack may be an anomaly, these types of situations are not. Off-leash dogs are everywhere and right there with them are people and dogs who wish they weren't off leash. It's not okay to excuse an off-leash dog with "It's ok he's friendly!" as he bounds up to anyone he pleases without regard for others' needs and personal space. It's not okay to ignore leash laws. And it's most definitely not okay to allow dogs off leash anywhere if they do not have the temperament for it.

have been affected by trauma. Being trauma-informed allows us to help support behavior change as it relates to healing. In fact, on her blog, Patricia McConnell acknowledges she's "believed for years that many of the dogs [she's] worked with had behavioral problems because of some kind of trauma, and [she] thinks a lot about what we've learned working with human trauma victims can be applied to dogs" (2017). So, it's prudent to invest time into preventing certain traumas by educating clients on keeping themselves and their dogs secure and remaining vigilant when out walking.

As trainers, we often caution against dog parks for good reasons: they can be poor environments for socialization at best, canine versions of Fight Club at their worst. But at least dog parks are fenced. When dogs are off leash in public it instantly makes any environment a dog park except the other "attendees" out walking their dogs don't know it. Some ways to keep our dogs and ourselves safe are to walk on trails or in parks/recreational areas with leash requirements; stay clear of hidden or tunneled areas where you can't put a safe distance between yourself and other leashed dogs; don't walk at night. But, as in our case, management isn't always enough.



Apache and one of his favorite people, Ryan Brix.

I've thought a lot about what saved Apache that day because it certainly wasn't me. I wonder if he'd not been muzzled if it would've been worse, either his face being mauled or the intensity of the attack if he could've fought back. Would it have been a fight to the death? But the main thought that keeps surfacing is that Apache never went down. Even though he was half both their sizes, he managed to stay on his feet — muzzled, without being able to defend himself. It's all he could do. And he did it. He saved himself. In the face of trauma, brutality and unimaginable pain he kept his mere 45-pounds firm. Having witnessed it, it's incredible to me he's even alive let alone being his fun-loving self and doing well.

We will not be afraid to walk even though we may be made uneasy by certain triggers. We will not be afraid to protect ourselves by whatever means available and necessary. We will not let this trauma define us, but it continues to shape us; much like water shapes rocks over time, only this was many years of wear poured into a single event.

We were doing everything right: he was muzzled, as he needs to be, my dogs were both leashed, and we were walking on a public trail in a town that has a leash law. So, what it all boils down to is we got lucky: my little boy survived, the dogs left my Emmie alone, and they didn't turn on me. Could've happened to anyone, anywhere, on any given Sunday.



Rachel Brix is a Fear-Free Certified Trainer, Certified Behavior Consult Canine- Knowledge Assessed and Certified Professional Dog Trainer -Knowledge Assessed through the Certification Council of Professional Dog Trainers and an accomplished writer. She is currently on hiatus

from training to focus on personal and professional development and spending quality time with her senior rescue dogs Emerson and Apache.

Photo by Ryan Brix.



Rachel Brix and Apache enjoy a trip to the Michigan shore.

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Resources

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- <https://dogpainrelief.com/ptsd-in-dogs-symptoms-diagnoses-and-treatment/>