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*Labrador*
Curiosities

By Paula Piatt
Illustration by Tom Goldsmith

# Closer Than You Think

Think you're close to your dog? You have no idea.

We've long known that snuggling up to your pup and gazing into his eyes releases the "feel good" hormone in both of you, but science is finding that your connection is so much more than that. As you gaze into each other's eyes, your brain and heart begin to sync. Before you know it, you're yawning and blinking and connecting with your dog in ways you couldn't imagine.

Let's start with the heart. Everyone has, or has had, a "heart" dog, one that will stay with you forever. Turns out, each of our companions is our "heart" dog, according to researchers at the University of Helsinki.

A study there of two dozen dogs (co-operative breeds bred for close interaction with us; think border collies and, of course, Labrador retrievers) and their owners revealed that even during a short-term interaction, the variability of their heart rates "co-modulated" – they began to take on similarities, rising and falling together.

As the pair spent quiet time together – before and after their experimental activities, and when the owners sat and stroked their dogs – their heart rate bonds were stronger. The deep connection formed demonstrated a "physiological and emotional connection comparable to those found in attachment relationships between humans," according to the findings. And in a surprising twist, our dogs lead the way – the biggest factor in changes to the owner's heart rate variability was their dog's heart rate.

And all this didn't take long. Researchers went into the experiment knowing that, over time, levels of the "feel good" hormone, oxytocin, will increase in both dogs and people, but the heart rate of these dogs and owners bonded within an hour, despite the lab setting and all its equipment and protocols.

Where our hearts go, apparently, our heads will follow.

At the Chinese Academy of Science in Beijing, a study initially designed to look at the genetics of autism revealed that the brains of dogs and humans, under the right circumstances, will synchronize. In the same way human-to-human interactions do over a relatively short period of time, our dog's brain waves fall into a similar pattern as ours.

Look into each other's eyes and the portion of our brains that control personality traits, emotional regulation, and social behavior (the frontal lobe) begins to harmonize. Petting our dog activates both our parietal lobes, which processes sensory information like touch and interpreting feelings. Combine the two activities and our connection is even stronger.

It makes sense that you would have a stronger connection with your own dog and that's true, but researchers were surprised at the speed with which dog and human strangers create that bond. This experiment paired unfamiliar dogs and people, and with each passing day, the "interbrain activity coupling" grew stronger, significantly increasing on days four and five.

But unlike our dogs leading our hearts, we lead the way with our heads. Using their mathematical magic, when looking at the brain wave data, researchers determined that our brains were initiating the synchronization. The

assumption is that our eye gaze and initiation of petting may be driving the coupled brain activity, and our dogs perceive us as leaders in the relationship.

While we can't see our hearts and minds melding, it's very real to sit on the couch and yawn along with your dog.

In the early 2010s, scientists found that our dogs do indeed yawn when we do and just the sound of our yawn is enough to bring it on. But they were unable to pinpoint why – are the just mimicking us, are they just showing empathy or is it "just because" we yawned?

We're pretty sure that humans yawn in empathy – those with higher levels of empathy are more likely to yawn contagiously, so a more recent experiment over in Japan at the University of Tokyo set out to find if there was a deeper meaning to our dog's yawn contagion.

Results showed that the dogs yawned in response to their owners more than a stranger, to a human more than a video, and more to an actual yawn than to a "fake" one, leading them to believe that it's much more than "just because," or a form of mimicry. Maybe they do just want to "be there for you."

The study put to rest the notion that contagious yawns in dogs are stress-related, having monitored their heart rates and found calm dogs yawning in response to their owners. That dogs respond to our yawns and not necessarily the yawns of their canine friends means you just might have an empathetic pup on your hands.

But before sitting down to yawn with your dog – which could lead to a nap on the couch for both of you – try connecting through blinks.

Scientists in Italy recently established that dogs blink in response to other dogs' blinks, although, again, they aren't sure if it's simply mimicry or, perhaps, a nod to communication between the two. Researchers didn't dive into blink synchronicity – a phenomenon found in people. (It's long been known that you and I will synchronize our blinks as we get deeper into our one-on-one conversations; it strengthens bonds and leads to more effective communication.) But does your pup blink back because it's better communication, is he just copying your moves, or, again, "just because" he happens to blink? And do your blinks synchronize, suggesting a deeper connection?

Back in Japan at the Laboratory of Human-Animal Interaction and Reciprocity at Azabu University near Tokyo, the answer was a solid… "maybe."

They found mutual synchronization of blinks between humans and dogs but were unable to connect the two in any meaningfully statistical way. The subtle difference was that dogs and humans didn't blink more at each other, but they (unknowingly?) timed their blinks at each other. So we're not causing each other to blink, just answering each other's blinks.

So who knows? Sync, think, blink? Just take the time to connect with your pup! But I would yawn last because, well, that whole nap thing.

**PAULA PIATT** lives in the Northern Tier of Pennsylvania with husband Steve and their two Labrador retrievers Molly and Riley, where they hunt and enjoy the outdoors. An award-winning outdoor writer, she is an active member of the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writers Association and serves as the group's executive director.