

'Transmitted down the leash': Anxious owners, anxious dogs

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(HealthDay)—Dog obedience trainer Cindy Leung has a very anxious

client who loves a very anxious breed, the Shetland Sheepdog.

"My [human] student startles at loud noises," Leung said. "That's just part of her personality. Loud, sudden noises startle her. Something weird that shows up in the environment startles her. She's got a really strong startle reflex, and her dogs have a strong startle reflex, and neither of them have great recovery."

It's Leung's job to help sort this out so her client can win obedience contests, but the situation poses a true chicken-or-egg dilemma.

"Is the dog startled because my student startles, because everyone startles when she startles, because we're all like, 'What was that? Oh, it was just a leaf falling off a tree. OK,'" Leung said. "Is the dog anxious because she's anxious? Or does she startle because in the past her dogs have startled and tried to bolt away? I can't really tell you, and she can't either, because I've asked her."

Animal researchers believe they now have the answer to that question.

A new study, published recently in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, has concluded that canines pick up on and absorb the fretfulness of their owners, and that's what fuels anxiety-related behavior problems among dogs.

Co-researcher James Serpell is director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, in Philadelphia. He said, "The way dog trainers put it, you can transmit fear down the leash, as it were. If you're a [dog owner](#), you can send this anxiety message almost down the leash to the dog and the dog can pick up on it."

Importantly, the study rules out two other strong possible explanations

for canine anxiety problems.

Leung's student isn't making her Shelties nervous by being overprotective and snap-responding to any perceived threat, the researchers said. No evidence was found that such "helicopter" dog parenting prompted canines to become reactive and neurotic.

The researchers also found no evidence that dogs became anxious because their owners were using overly coercive training methods, sending their dogs into nervous fear.

Picking up on anxiety

"They eliminated both the training route and the helicopter parenting route," Serpell said. "Their results point to a direct effect of the owner's personality on the dog's behavior."

For this study, the research team analyzed data from more than 1,100 dog owners who took part in an online survey.

The questionnaire gathered information on the humans' anxiety, training methods and protective behavior toward their dogs. The dogs' fear and anxiety levels, and their emotional reactivity to their humans, also were assessed through questions asked of the owners.

Fear and anxiety among dogs did not differ greatly due to either the training methods their humans use or the level of their humans' protective instincts.

However, a canine's anxiety-related behavior problems were significantly linked to their owner's self-reported anxiety levels, the investigators found.

"Dogs have co-evolved with humans and are acutely sensitive to how

their humans behave. Dogs are constantly monitoring their owners and sort of trying to second-guess their behavior. Sometimes for the dog owner it seems uncanny how well the dog seems to anticipate how they're feeling and what they're going to do," Serpell said.

"In some cases, this is great. You can think of many contexts in which having an animal that can anticipate your thoughts is wonderful, in terms of training or performing tasks for people," he continued. "But in the context of an owner who's experiencing a lot of anxiety, you can see the disadvantage. The dog's picking up on that anxiety and it's making the dog more anxious as a result. The dog's thinking, oh my goodness, what kind of threat is in the vicinity that my owner is responding to?"

What's more, dogs with higher empathy scores were more affected by their owner's anxiety, the study authors noted.

That makes sense to Leung, given that different breeds handle stress in very different ways.

"Some breeds are more susceptible to it than others," said Leung, co-owner of Trainers to the Rescue in Cornelius, Ore. "Labradors are notoriously oblivious. Most sporting dogs—pointers, Irish setters—are completely oblivious to your emotional state."

Rescue, puppy mill dogs more vulnerable

After giving the study a read, Leung said she can get on board with the notion that anxious people can create anxious dogs.

"I have neurotic students who create neurotic dogs," Leung said.

However, the situation is probably more nuanced than this study makes out, Leung added.

For example, dogs adopted from shelters or raised in puppy mills quite likely will have a different, potentially more fragile, emotional makeup than other dogs, Leung said.

Mary Burch, an applied animal behaviorist and director of American Kennel Club Family Dog, added that the co-dependent problem can go deeper than mere feelings. An owner's emotional state can impact their dog in concrete ways, undermining the canine's sense of security.

"Worrying and thinking about something is unlikely to have an effect on a dog," Burch said. "When that worry translates into being so worried the person does not go outside, it affects the dog. There might be no fun outdoor play sessions, and no exercise, which is critical for the mental health of a dog."

Thus, the highs and lows of a dog owner suffering from [mood disorders](#) might seriously interrupt a pet's daily routine and promote anxiety, Burch said.

"This could mean a dog is not even fed properly on schedule, or if the person won't go into the community because they are so anxious," Burch said. "It could mean no shopping, and as a result, no dog food. I once worked with a woman who was in this exact situation, and she had resorted to feeding her dog breakfast cereal."

Serpell sees one potentially useful notion in this bond between humans and canines.

Particularly empathic [dogs](#) who serve as barometers for their human's moods might be able to help troubled folks identify and address when they're experiencing [anxiety](#), Serpell said. Armed with the proper coping tools, a person could use their dog's cues to better manage their own mood—and therefore improve their dog's life.

"It's almost like a sort of biofeedback mechanism," Serpell explained. "Maybe it could help the owner to recognize themselves when they're feeling anxious and consider why they're feeling anxious, and perhaps help to calm themselves down and feel less anxious. I can see that being valuable."

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about the [health benefits of owning a pet](#).

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