

The Dog Brain, Part II: Canine Emotion

Dogs experience a range of feelings, similar to those of humans.

M. Christine Zink, DVM, Ph.D.

After an exhausting day at work, you look forward to a relaxing evening at home. You open your front door and a whirlwind of fur rushes to greet you. Bright eyes, an ear-to-ear grin and a wildly wagging tail confirm that your dog is thrilled to see you. "It is great to be loved by a dog!" you think.

As you change from your work clothes to more casual duds, you remember that in college, a professor told you that animals don't really experience emotions. He said that what we perceive as emotions are really just responses to the likelihood that people, objects or events in the dog's environment will result in reward or punishment for the dog. This theory of behaviorism was promulgated the 1960s by American psychologist B. F. Skinner. Strict behaviorists would say that your dog greets you with excitement, not because it loves you, but because it knows that dinner will soon follow.

The drive for rewards explains part of canine behavior, but not all of it. With a few more decades of neuroscientific research under their belts, scientists now understand what dog lovers have known all along – dogs experience emotions similar to those of their owners, including happiness, affection, enjoyment, confusion, pride, embarrassment, anxiety, depression, anger, surprise, and even more subtle emotions, such as distrust and resignation.

Positive emotions help dogs build enduring personal resources, such as problem-solving abilities; coordination; and social relationships with dogs, people and other species. Negative emotions help protect dogs from situations that might pose a danger.

Want to read the full story? Pick up the November 2008 issue of DOG WORLD today, or subscribe to receive the best dog articles, dog news, and dog information every month!