Resilience is key to a better-behaved and happier pet

Check out these science-backed activities for building stress resilience



Provide safety and security ("security" = feeling safe).

Feeling secure prevents them from attempting to escape or defend themselves.



Ensure physical & mental wellbeing.

A pet who feels healthy (incuding a healthy nervous system) is better able to listen to you and make good decisions.



Provide opportunities for choice and agency

Enjoying some control over their environment & experiences increases willingness to cooperate.

Resilience

The ability to:
Adapt to change
Return to calm after a stressful experience

Important for good behavior and for health



Predictability

Letting your pet know what to expect improves cooperation & coping ability.



Provide social support

If your pet knows you have their back & understand their needs, it's easier for them to listen to you.



Regular opportunities to decompress

Help your pet relax and recover from the day's stresses to prevent acting out.



Complete the stress cycle after a stressful experience

Discharging the effects of acute stress helps your dog return to a calm and cooperative state.

Continued...

www.enjoyabledogs.com
wendyk@enjoyabledogs.com
859-333-0926

Enjoyable Dogs

Wendy S. Katz CPDT-KA, KPA
CTP, CCUI, FDM
Certified Fear Free Professional

Why I emphasize emotional resilience

When we address the feelings that drive problem behaviors, training and behavior modification become much easier.

Every spontaneous behavior your dog performs emerges to fulfill some internal urge. Until we address their inner feelings, teaching obedience is a band-aid that will likely fall off in moments of challenge. Many of the problematic feelings arise from trying to cope with the stresses a dog experiences in a human-centered world.

Bouncing back from stress is also important because chronic stress negatively impacts health.

How to use this workbook

The pages that follow expand on seven dimensions of resilience-building.

They provide examples of some of the training and environmental adjustment approaches I use with clients who need help with grooming & health care, stranger danger, inter-pet relationships, and other issues.

They include questions to get you thinking about how addressing emotional resilience can help your own situation with your pet.

You may notice I often say "pet" instead of "dog." Cats often get overlooked when it comes to low stress husbandry and health care. I'm happy to include your cat(s) in our discussions.

You don't have to do it all. There's a lot of information here. I suggest you start by skimming the whole thing to **see what seems especially significant for your situation. Start there**. Address the other elements as you're able.



I'm available to clarify, coach, and help you choose and implement approaches that address your needs (I probably have opinions about where to start, but I welcome your perspective).

Wendy

Physical & mental wellbeing

Keep these in mind if you hit a behavioral roadblock, as wellness can change from day to day

How your pet feels in their body affects their ability to cooperate and learn.
It's easier for us and kinder for them if we make sure their internal state is okay before trying to change their outward behavior.

Fatigue can be mental (e.g. stresses piling up), or physical, from unaccustomed exercise or sleep interruption.

Soreness can be hard to notice. Dogs and cats are masters at masking pain. Watch for hesitation to sit or lie down (on their own initiative), or to jump up onto furniture if that's permitted. Also observe their posture: is their back level or hunched? Is their stance balanced or do they habitually shift weight off of one leg? Is their movement loose or awkward? Become observant of their current stance and gaits so you can notice subtle changes in the future that might indicate they're compensating for pain.

The adrenaline rush of a vet visit usually masks all but extreme forms of pain, so subtle chronic pain is hard to diagnose in the clinic. I can show you how to take videos to share with your vet. There are vets in Lexington with specialty certification in rehab therapy. Ask me if you're interested.

Itchiness and skin irritation can arise from allergies, infections, or parasites. If you notice your pet scratching a lot, rubbing their face, licking their paws (beyond normal self-cleaning activity), or reddened areas of skin, it's time for a vet visit. Also look inside their ears for excessive gunk, and check for a yeasty or cheesy odor. If you don't feel safe getting your face that close to theirs, or they won't let you, we can work on that together.

internal disorder, (e.g., hormone imbalance, gastrointestinal disturbance, neurochemical imbalance, or other illness). Watch for changes in appetite and/or activity level, grumpiness, anxiety, emergence of aggression.

The gut and nervous system are intimately connected, so pay special attention to GI function when dealing with anxiety or aggression. Chronic loose stools need to be addressed.

Application

What areas of concern do you notice in the wellbeing category? Is there an issue not on the list above? If any, it's time to call the vet!

Are they chronic or occasional?

How hard or easy are they to detect? Have you noticed any obvious behavior changes when a visible health problem emerges?

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Safety and security

Safety refers to the measures you or your pet take to keep them safe from harm
Security refers to your pet's perception that they're safe

Feeling secure helps prevent behavioral and health problems related to chronic stress. It also prevents attempts to flee or attack when they feel unsafe. Helping them leave the situation is one solution. Here are some other security problems and solutions:

Hypervigilance at windows

We like to have the curtains, and sometimes the door, open to let light in. How does your pet respond to things they see out the window? If they calmly observe, with relaxed body language, there's no problem. If they vocalize and/or become physically agitated at things they perceive, and this happens repeatedly each day, the chronic stress can negatively impact their mental and physical health and make other behavior problems worse.

A simple solution: Apply translucent window film. You don't have to cover the whole window, just to a height that blocks their view of upsetting activity. The film is applied with a mixture of water and dish soap, so there's no glue to worry about. It lets in a decent amount of light, and you still can see through the upper part of the window. Home improvement stores carry it, or you can find a variety of styles at windowfilmworld.com

If someone in your household is firmly opposed to window film, there are training-based solutions. This requires more effort on your part, but could allow your pet the enrichment activity of observing the world without becoming overly stressed.

Overreaction to noises outside

A simple remedy*:* Run a box fan, aiming it at the source of the problem noise; use a white noise machine, or ask about training.

Overwhelm during parties

We aim to reach a point in our training where your dog can relax beside you during a quiet visit with a few friends. The noise and bustle of a larger or longer party is likely to be too much. We can teach your dog to happily hang out in a quiet place away from commotion.

Application

Where and when does your pet feel safe? How do they let you know (what behaviors and body language do you watch for)?

Where and when does your pet feel unsafe? How do they let you know? How does this impact what you can do together?

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Choice and agency

Providing your pet come control over how things happen goes a long way to promote calmness and cooperation



Environmental choices

An enriched environment includes a variety of pastimes and places to hang out. For example, my dogs enjoy sleeping in different places at different times: on a cot vs on the floor; in a round bed with sides (I'll be honest, it's my easy chair), or stretched out; warm vs cool, sun vs shade. They have a variety of toys and chews, opportunities to sniff around the garden for critter trails, and visits to nature areas.

The ability to make things happen

The most powerful way to teach good manners and improve your dog's overall behavior is not to drill obedience cues, but rather to teach a few behaviors that plant ideas and then reward their good choices: sit or lie down to ask for what they want, for example. When repeatedly rewarded over time, these actions acquire pleasant associations and become habitual choices.

Agency

Agency is the opportunity to act on and explore one's environment (in safe and appropriate ways). It's a powerful way to help your pet feel comfortable and therefore calm and cooperative. Agency takes many forms:

- The opportunity to opt in or opt out of an activity.
- The opportunity to do things under one's own power; e.g., entering a crate or car voluntarily, sticking their head into a harness instead of having it thrust upon them.
- The opportunity to investigate and observe their environment.
- The opportunity to search for good things and to solve problems (just as many of us enjoy shopping or working various types of puzzles).

Application

What types of chews, treats, and toys have you tested for your dog or cat? Do their preferences change from day to day?

What types of variety are there in your pets' indoor and outdoor environments? e.g., places to sniff, opportunities to observe the world (if it doesn't stress them out), heights to occupy, surface textures? Can you think of ways to enrich their environment?

How does your dog or cat let you know when they want or don't want to be petted?

What situations in your own life might you refuse if you weren't allowed to ask for a break (e.g., for me, many health care encounters)?

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Predictability

Take the suspense out of your pet's life to get better cooperation

Knowing what to expect can reduce apprehension and stress. Some ways to increase predictability in your pet's life include:

Pattern Games

These are interactions in which movements and treat delivery happen predictably. They also introduce an element of choice. They can help your pet buy into a situation instead of acting out. Here are examples of pattern games we might use:

- The up & down game, ping pong game, and snuffle stations combine a relaxing form of eating with opportunities to observe something worrisome that's happening at a distance they feel is safe. This helps your dog or cat learn to accept the worrisome thing.
- The 123 counting game can be a moving game to help a dog or cat say when they feel okay to move forward, or a stationary game that tells them we're about to do a thing they don't like, but it will be over soon (I find this enormously helpful for nail trims).

Informational cues

- You can name the body part you're about to touch; e.g., "ear" or "paw," so they know you're doing something they've practiced.
- When a pet sees or hears something worrisome, we can teach a cue that acknowledges we notice and are okay with the situation. They learn they can turn to us for a treat and for help moving away from the cause of concern instead of acting aggressively.
- For cats and small dogs, you can teach a cue that says you'd like to pick them up, and then wait for acknowledgement (sometimes we teach them to give a "go ahead" cue in return. Predictability and choice/agency often go hand in hand.

Routines for accessing resources

They pay attention instead of mugging for treats if you use consistent words so they know where to look for a training treat. Will it be delivered to them ("yep"), bowled for them to chase ("get it"), or will several treats be scattered for them to snuffle up ("sprinkle")?

Consistent Rules

It's stressful to be unsure of what's permitted. If one family member likes the dog to jump up on them, you can teach a cue to let them know it's okay only when they hear the cue.

Application

What situations would you like to help your pet feel less apprehensive and/or be easier to handle?

What sorts of informational cues do you think would be most helpful to you and your pet? Are there events, such as feeding time or harnessing, where it could be helpful to introduce a routine to reduce overexcitement?

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Social support

This means letting your dog know you have their back and understand their needs, so they're less likely to panic or to act aggressively

Noticing & accomodating subtle signs of concern
When you can detect the subtle positions of ears, tail, and facial skin that indicate your pet's earliest signs of concern or distress, you can use techniques I'll teach you to help them feel better and prevent escalation.

Helping them get distance from something scary
It's helpful to teach your pet that they can remove themselves from a person or animal that upsets them, instead of acting out.

Watching the world together
Sitting quietly together at a safe distance from other people and animals can build coping ability in a dog who reacts to strange people and animals. A safe distance is one at which they don't display distress, and no one is likely to enter their bubble of security.

Adding a decompression activity, such as a chew or a snuffle station, can be a bonus.

You may notice that many of these resilience categories overlap. Observing the world together is a way to provide agency through information gathering.

Sometimes a dog friend helps
Some timid or fearful dogs can find courage from the example of a confident dog that they know and trust.

Application

Study the body language videos and handouts linked at https://www.enjoyabledogs.com/pre-class-resources. What are your pet's earliest signs that they're concerned about or displeased with a situation? The shape of their eyes? The set of their mouth? Something else?

What are some situations at home in which providing social support could help prevent unwanted behaviors? How would this increase what you can enjoy together?

What are some situations out in the world in which providing social support could help prevent unwanted behaviors?

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Help your dog complete the stress cycle after a stressful experience

and

Provide regular opportunities to decompress

Rotate these according to your dog's preferences



Stress is at the root of many problem behaviors. Just as some people decompress by doing a vigorous workout, while others curl up with a book and a beverage, pets have preferences for how to blow off stress.

An intense training session can be an opportunity to see how an individual deals with stress. Some shut down and remove themselves, or seek to cuddle. Some dogs will pick up a chew and start to gnaw. Some get the zoomies. I've worked with puppies who needed periodic opportunities to snuffle treats or play with a toy during a session to prevent stress-driven jumping and nipping.

After a long drive or long periods in a crate at a dog sport event, my youngest Aussie craves a chance to run fast and far.

The shake-off
An all-over body shake is a common behavior that indicates your dog is making an emotional transition. There's some evidence that you can mark and reward shake-offs to help your dog learn to get over mild stressors.

Examples of active decompression
Vigorous physical activity; lighthearted play, exploring and sniffing in nature, going for a swim.

Examples of quiet decompression
Snuggling with a loved one, relaxing in nature, napping, chewing, shredding, repetitive licking, snuffling, deep breathing on cue.

Application

What forms of active and quiet decompression activities have you observed your dog choosing?

What's practical for you to offer regularly?

What occasional stresses does your dog experience that would lead to a need to help them complete the stress cycle?

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Wow, that's a lot!

Don't despair!

You don't have to do everything at once.

This is where I come in.

We'll go over your responses to the application questions.

We'll celebrate what you're already doing that's helpful.

We'll identify a couple of things to get you started that will yield the most benefits for your efforts.

We can add additional beneficial activities as you have the time and energy.



References (worthwhile reading, if you wish)

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