

The Zen of Dog Training: Part 6

Exercise—Good For the Body, Great For the Mind

By Kimberly Artley

Much is being communicated, established and reinforced during a structured walk—it's a necessary part of the human-canine dynamic. While this is a necessity, so is a dog's ability to let loose and have the freedom to run, frolic, jump and just be a dog. Leash walks do take the edge off, energy wise; but most dogs need more.



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Dogs are built for motion, and in motion they should stay. Daily exercise is a primal, physical, mental, and emotional need everyone has. Bodies are set up to take in, absorb, utilize and release energy. To maintain the flow. When we neglect to provide this for dogs, the flow of energy is halted. When energy is absorbed and not released, it compounds upon itself and creates imbalance in all systems. When there's imbalance in the systems, it gets expressed in numerous ways; especially behaviorally.

If dogs don't have an outlet to release energy, this stuck energy builds, alters the state of mind, intensifies existing behaviors, and creates new ones as they effort to provide an outlet for themselves. In short, when an outlet isn't provided by us, it will be created by our dogs. Bye-bye, your favorite pair of shoes. Hello, holes dug in the backyard. Ouchy, couch with the chewed up armrest.

Dogs crave balance. It's their baseline nature, and they'll always do whatever they can to return to it. Of all the instinctual needs (see Part 1 of this series in the Winter/Holiday 2014 edition), this one easily slides into the top of the priority list. In the wild, canines can roam up to seventy miles in one day. Here in the U.S., many are lucky if they get half a mile in.

Daily exercise that meets and depletes a dog's individual energy stores is one of the most fundamental of all the instinctual needs they have, and the one that gets unfulfilled the most here in America. This easily gives way to frustration, stress and anxiety, which is then made manifest via excessive barking, digging, chewing, whining, jumping, aggression, and other coping mechanisms developed to deal with this lack of fulfillment.

As Dr. Brene Brown points out, "We are the most indebted, obese, addicted and medicated adult cohort in U.S. history." Conversely, the dogs here in the U.S. are some of the most overweight, psychologically challenged, neurotic, addicted and medicated animals on the planet. We've forced them to live in far-from-instinctual manners, don't provide them with nearly enough exercise, medicate them instead of investing time and energy into addressing the source and root cause of behavior, and any guidance and direction they're receiving from us is coming from a very ungrounded, stressed out, anxious, impatient, frustrated, nervous space. No wonder!

How do we meet and deplete our dog's individual energy level? First, know the dog. Consider the breed or suspected mix of breeds. The jobs and types of activities their breed or breed mixes were

bred for. Characteristics. How the dog spends most of his or her time. Is the dog crated and cooped up most of the day? Consider whether or not the dog is getting enough mental stimulation—another energy drainer; pair this with physical exercise and it's a double whammy energy zapper.

In order to effectively deplete energy stores, the intensity and duration of the exercise should meet and exceed the individual dog's energy level. Neither a backyard or a trip to the dog park should be substitution for structured exercise. A backyard is a perk, a convenient outhouse, and a glorified kennel. If using a backyard for exercise purposes, we should be out with our dog and engaging them. We can create a makeshift agility course and actively work the dog—burning physical and cognitive calories. Burn up the yard with a fierce game of fetch. But simply letting the dog out in the backyard is not a fair, suitable, or effective exercise replacement. There is nothing fulfilling about this.

Reality check. Much like the previous example indicates, a trip to the dog park should never replace structured exercise; and all too often it does. Dogs get overly excited, and many reward this state of mind by leashing them up and taking them to the park. We park our car, as our dog is panting heavily, barking, frantically pacing from side to side in the back seat. Then we get out, open the door, and let

the dog out, who is about to jump out of her skin with excitement. We get dragged to the gate, further rewarding this state of mind by unhooking the leash and opening the gate door. Within nanoseconds our dog bolts off, running circles around the park setting all the other dogs off with this unbalanced and overly excited energy.

When any dog's state of mind is this escalated and this elevated, much like people who are feeling very emotionally charged, they have a tendency to make more reactive, snap-judgment, irrational choices. No choice coming from an unbalanced space is a good or sound one. Furthermore, depending on the other dogs' manners, social skills and current states of mind, you never know what kind of interaction you're going to get or how your dog's state of mind will be received.

Dog parks typically tend to attract those who place responsibility on the venue itself to take care of their dog's exercise needs, instead of proactively engaging and taking care of this very important need themselves. Meeting our dog's needs is our responsibility.

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catch up on text messages, e-mails and other distractions. This is where we can easily set everyone up for trouble. Yes, by all means, enjoy the dog park; just sufficiently exercise your dog beforehand so she enters with a balanced, sound, level state of mind and energy.

Engaging in daily structured exercise with our dog fosters connection, and is an absolute must for reaching and maintaining a calm, grounded, balanced state of mind. Some great options to test and explore with your dog are: hiking, walking with a backpack, swimming, fetch, agility, jogging, or the walk-a-block-jog-a-block method. Even biking, roller-skating and rollerblading are good options, as we can double the distance in the same amount of time.

Short on time? Increase the intensity. Have the time? Increase the duration and enjoy! As the saying goes, a tired dog is a good dog, and there's much truth in that. When a dog is provided the means to deplete his or her energy stores, they're better able to make choices from a calmer, more balanced, and grounded space. Plus, there's simply no more energy left to scheme and get into anything! The lesson for us here is to get active, get healthy, be responsible, and actively nurture balance. 🐾

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