

## **Seeking Therapy? What makes a nose work class therapeutic and why.**

If you haven't heard that "nose work is therapeutic for dogs", you must be living under a rock. No, even then I am sure some dog's would have come up and sniffed at your rock with owner in tow, who waited patiently while her dog gathered all the information from your hiding spot. On seeing you she would startle (what are you doing under the rock, anyway?), and on composing herself she would tell you, "I let him sniff as long as he wants now on walks, because it's good for him to use his nose".

And there you have it, the latest dog owner belief. Thankfully, this belief has a bit more substance to it than common owner beliefs from the past, and even more importantly there is no harm in it for their dog's. As more and more pet dogs are given opportunities to use their nose, the anecdotal evidence builds that a dog that uses their olfactory system regularly will often show a reduction in the behaviours we all link with negative emotional states - anxiety, reactivity and aggression. It really does sound too good to be true.

As some of you know, I have been hooked on the link between this activity and the subsequent behaviour change in dogs for over 6 years now. Like many of you, Marion Brand was the first to introduce me to one version of Nose Work referred to as K9 Nose Work® with my two carpet pissers - I mean Chihuahuas - after we finished two years working on the musical Legally Blonde. I knew that life could easily be very boring for them after we finished the show, and nose work sounded interesting. Little did I know just how interesting I would find it.

While there are lots of reasons for attending Nose Work or Scent Work classes with your dog, the one we hear thrown around a lot is the therapeutic aspect that prevails. These classes will vary tremendously in approach and application, and it is this variation that is important to look at when we are interested in nose work specifically to improve a dog's overall wellbeing. The benefits of nose work are tremendous for dogs, but only when certain variables are in place. When these variables are not present, nose work classes can not only be unhelpful in improving our dog's emotional state, but can actually increase a dog's anxiety and reactivity. It is vital for us all to realise that not all nose work classes are equal.

The list we are going to delve into together has been created from information gained, and observations made over the past two to three years that I have travelled around Australia giving nose work workshops focused specifically on the therapy of this wonderful activity. The list is not final, nor exhaustive. This is a very young activity for us, and I have no doubt that our understanding on how to utilise nose work to improve a dog's general well

being will grow vastly over the coming years. But it is a start to help us all improve the lives of dogs, whether we are a dog trainer wanting to use scent activities and formal classes to help our clients, or we are owners of “project dogs” ourselves.

## **Important aspects of a nose work or scent work class to enhance it's therapy benefits**

### **1 The opportunity for the dog to hunt free of social pressure**

This is probably the most important aspect of the set up of a class for the dog's with emotional issues. While we have all experienced dogs that exhibit over the top behaviours in the presence of other dog's – lunging, barking, pulling, bum puckering sets of behaviour we refer to as “reactive”, there are many dogs who don't do the full monty, but who are still way short of feeling footloose and fancy free in the presence of unknown dogs. You often have to look a lot closer and be a lot more practiced in seeing, but the tell tail signs are there like quick looks to the exit, speed increase or decrease, small changes in muscle tension, pupil dilation... the list could go on and on, but basically you get what I mean. We all know that dogs (like humans - I am one of these) can display social discomfort by becoming more rowdy and hyperactive. I have often heard this behaviour change analysed as how much the dog “loves the game”. Look a bit closer and you see a dog that is simply uncomfortable.

If therapy from nose work classes is what you are after, your dog will never get it from being introduced to a new environment and the activity in the presence of other dogs. All other dogs who are partaking in the class must be away from the working area. In time and with improvement, other dogs may be added methodically as part of a systematic, pre-considered counter conditioning program. Our goal is to lower arousal by providing an environment that is considered safe and interesting to explore. If other dogs are just hanging out with their owners waiting for their turn or even in crates down the other end of the building, the experience will be less positive for each dog than what it could be, and thus in my opinion the instructor has failed to provide an experience that will be beneficial. Dog's that are waiting for their turn and can see the other dog working are also not immune from the experience, creating an increase in distress in them, which again goes against the very nature of what a therapeutic activity is supposed to be.

In this area we need to make sure that dogs have skill and ability in waiting their “turn”, it is counteractive to stress a dog out while waiting in the car or crate when this is a foreign and stressful experience for it. Thus a good instructor will make sure that dogs coming to them are comfortable being left alone for short amounts of time, or provide a co-instructor to work with the

owner and dog when it is not hunting to develop this skill.

It is imperative also when we are looking at social pressure for dog's that we look at ourselves - the humans present, some dogs will not be able to work with other people in the room watching - even if they are behind a gate and well away from the work area. For dogs that are socially sensitive they may need to go and greet the other humans in the room before they can focus on the hunting work at hand. When they enter the search area, especially for the very first time and the first run for a new week, if the dog indicates a need to go and "say hello" to the humans, it should be allowed to do so. Again, failure to allow the dog to do this can place unnecessary pressure on the dog and in some cases prevent them from being able to focus on the hunt. When we hear trainers say "nose work is the dog's game" and then force them by lead or by sticking a box with chicken under their nose, the trainer is missing the whole point. I want the dog to do whatever they need to do so that they can choose to play my hunting game. I'm not going to fight the dog away from what it is interested in, I am going to allow exploration until the best game is what I have to offer. Anything less reduces the therapeutic opportunity because we are once again putting the dog in a situation where we take it's choice away. Let the dog do what they need to do, and use that information to modify antecedents and consequences - hey presto you have a dog that is desperate to play your game.

## **2. Starting with something the dog naturally loves.**

As a therapy it is vital in the introduction and early stages of the process that nose work classes provide no more pressure or discomfort on the dog than is necessary. Dogs that dearly need nose work activities added to their lives are going to find just the experience of going to a new place, working in the presence of new people, and smelling the presence of other dogs more than enough "new" for the first few weeks. That is why I want to have something wonderful that the dog naturally wants to start the therapy ball rolling, and for most dog's this is BBQ chicken or roast lamb or beef, or toys can also be utilised here - what is most important is that we are not asking the dog to learn something new (in our case a new smell) while they are unnerved. Bring your nervous Nelly into a nose work class for therapy, and thrust a new odour under her nose followed by a treat while she is feeling uncomfortable about the new environment, and even if she eats the food YOU WILL STILL BE CREATING AN ASSOCIATION BETWEEN THE NEW SMELL AND HER FEELING OF DISCOMFORT. This means that every time she smells the smell or you ask her to go find the smell, that feeling of discomfort will be triggered. That's classical conditioning 101.

So for me, it makes no sense to not start the dog off hunting for food (and I have thought about this a lot, and had great discussions with folk who feel

differently!). Teaching a dog to find a novel odour is a very simple process, however using nose work to improve a project dog's welfare is not. When we start out with something that the dog already loves we give them the very best chance of having great experiences straight away. Great experiences equals comfort and confidence, and comfort and confidence equals desirable behaviour.

Starting off with something the dog already has a positive association with also allows us to get the dog hunting more quickly, which allows that big olfactory brain to start working and creating a tired, content dog. The science of sniffing is very new, and while we really do not know why it is so beneficial for our dogs, the evidence that it IS continues to pile up. Science will catch up soon enough.

### **3. The ability of the instructor to modify the antecedents and the consequences specific to the dog's needs in the moment.**

A fundamental part of all the training we do is understanding the functional relationship between the antecedent, behaviour, and consequence. After all, it is the only way we influence behaviour, so being able to quickly see how the environment is influencing behaviour and change it up to get more of the behaviour we want is what we all do every time we train.

When it comes to using nose work classes for therapy it is imperative that instructors can identify what specific aspects of the training area (the antecedents), are influencing the behaviour that is being observed (for better or worse), and what could be changed to improve the behavioural response. Do I (as the instructor) need to move out of the search area and guide the owner about what to do because my presence is making the dog too nervous? Do I need to use a higher value food? Do I need to put out just one hide to slow the dog down? Do I need to put out multiple hides to reduce the dog's focus on the owner? Would the dog be more comfortable without the big heavy harness on? Would the dog feel more settled if the owner moved away from the door and sat down? All of these changes in antecedent arrangements are some examples of things I have done that have made HUGE differences to a dog's comfort state, and thus behaviour. It may be that we have to move a box just a tiny bit, or change the angle. It's important to also say that I have often made the wrong call, sometimes thinking the issue was one thing, and when I changed it seeing nothing happen. I remember one dog who was described as "nervous" and "sticky" (to the owner), and I poo pood her choice of "smackos" for the dog to hunt for - thinking that chicken skin would be a much more likely food type to motivate her to move away from the owner. Suffice to say it took me way too long to work out that THIS DOG preferred smackos... and once I swapped the chook for smackos the little dude had no trouble leaving mum! As my mentor

Susan Friedman continues to remind us all; “behaviour is the study of one”, meaning that every individual animal, while bound as we all are to the laws of behaviour that govern this planet, stands before you as a unique learner and must be worked with as an individual.

For a dog that is uncomfortable in the search environment, the instructor's ability to understand the dog's choice of “reinforcement” in the moment, and respond accordingly is another vital aspect of getting the therapeutic value from nose work classes.

The main activity in an introductory class will be to find food in a box, or create a conditioned response to a novel odour by pairing it with the delivery of food (depending on the instructor's methodology). With the common belief that “reinforcement = food”, and “food = reinforcement” we are all too easily swayed to believe that if the dog is eating the food we are reinforcing a behaviour, and/or creating a positive association to the novel stimulus presented before the food. This is a really dangerous belief to hold onto in general, but especially if nose work for therapy is your goal.

If the class offers the chicken in a box game as a way to introduce dogs to nose work and the dog is indicating via its body language that there is a consequence more highly valued than food it is motivated to access, not allowing the dog to access that reinforcer will greatly reduce the therapeutic gains. Control of the environment, meaning the freedom to choose what they do when it is their “turn” is central to nose work as a therapy. For sure, it is the instructor's job to move the dog into a place where they choose to play the box game, but as I have said above, the failure to acknowledge the dog's desires and needs and allow access, whether in the role of a motivating operator or consequence, is a failure to understand the fundamental value of nose work classes for therapy.

A great example of this is the dog that wants to leave the search area as soon as they have come in. If orientation to the door is obvious and consistent, the dog is telling us escape is more reinforcing than food. If an instructor believes that a positive or successful experience in a nose work class only occurs when the dog finds and eats the food, they fail to provide the dog with the control. Failing to give the dog control will fail to give the dog the most positive experience they can have, and thus the most value from a therapy point of view. If the dog wants out, the dog should be allowed to go out, and in this scenario it is my personal option to ask the owner to invite the dog to come back in again - knowing full well that the dog will probably head straight back to the exit. This is one of the most powerful experiences a dog can have in nose work classes, the experience of learning you will be heard, and more often than not when the dog is once again invited into the search area, it will investigate, if only just a bit. The agency

this animal has just been given is the very experience it needs to build confidence to begin to hunt. If they are forced to stay more often than not shut down will occur, thus adding to the dog's experience that force and coercion from humans is the norm, reducing again the dog's comfort and trust in humans.

#### **4. The instructors ability and skill in reading body language**

The above aspect of a nose work class is impossible without having an instructor that has a very high level of observational skills. Behaviour is communication, being able to firstly notice and then correctly interpret what that behaviour is telling us is key to creating an opportunity for the dog to succeed.

I know of no other way to get good at observing behaviour than to observe behaviour. I am forever grateful for the chance to improve my skills in this area by working with birds. They say so much with so little, and let's face it when you don't notice a slight slicking of the feathers and they fly off and are gone for two days, the consequence of your lack of observational skills is rather high! But seriously, watching dogs is the best way to get really good at understanding what dogs are saying at a very minute level. It was such a wonderful experience to travel with Marion initially and watch her work dogs, I saw so many different dogs in so many different situations, it really helped me understand canine behaviour specific to the context of nose work. And we all have the opportunity to do this, especially if you are teaching or are interested in teaching nose work. Getting out to other classes and just observing dogs is the way to go for sure.

The other thing here is to totally acknowledge and accept that none of us will ever interpret canine behaviour one hundred percent correctly, one hundred percent of the time. Of course that should not cause us to do nothing! If we see a dog is uncomfortable in any way, the only wrong thing we can do is nothing! Try changing the boxes, try changing the set up, try the dog on lead, try the dog off lead. It may be nothing other than experience and time that will build the dog's confidence, but one thing is for sure, doing nothing because you are not sure exactly what to do is the biggest failure of all.

Scent work classes are only going to increase in number, the ease for the owner and the benefit for dogs means that it is a no brainer that soon every trainer out there will be utilising olfaction to some degree in their programs. Whether it is to hunt for an drop of essential oil in a nose work class or scouring the back yard for an hour or more, sniffing out the kibble that no longer comes in a bowl and gone in thirty seconds (hello Labrador owners),

or finally being given the time to investigate the latest neighbourhood goings on during the daily stroll with the human, allowing a dog to use it's nose is the best canine enrichment around. But if we are formally going to offer nose work classes and praise it's therapeutic aspects, it is imperative we all dig deep and understand just how to present this incredibly simple game in a class setting to best milk the marrow out of the benefits it can bring to our dogs.

Peta Clarke for CLICK magazine APDTA 2019