

Helping Working Dogs Deal with Stress

By Mino Fuller



Photo by lophoto, 123rf.com

My name is Mino Fuller and I am the owner of Hands on Hounds LLC, which provides canine massage, acupressure and Reiki. Having received my certifications from the Rocky Mountain School of Animal Acupressure and Massage, I have been practicing canine massage since 2009.

The two retired racing greyhounds that I am owned by are Romeo, who has been a Delta Society therapy dog since 2003, and Runza, who retired from his racing career last year. My passion is helping working dogs such as those used for search and rescue, police work and therapy, as well as service and guide dogs. The treatments I offer these amazing animals help them to do their jobs better. They deserve it because they contribute so much to our society without asking for anything in return. It's my way of paying tribute to my first greyhound and therapy dog Gryffin, who passed away in October 2007.

Gryffin and Romeo began volunteering as therapy dogs in nursing homes and libraries in 2003 and they were noticeably exhausted after these visits. Their work didn't seem too strenuous which left me wondering why. It seemed that they were working not just physically but also mentally and they seemed to be picking up emotional tension from both their clients and myself. When I talked with other handlers about experiences with therapy dogs, many of their dogs were also experiencing the same results from their work. That is when I started to look for ways to help them recover from the stress of their jobs.

When I talk about stress in dogs, people look at me as if I'm crazy. Dogs have stress in their lives? Of course, all dogs do, but especially

working dogs. Stress is not just having a difficult boss to work for or having to deal with traffic jams. There are several kinds of stress in both humans and dogs' lives including physical, mental, emotional and environmental. Recognizing stress in your working dog will help you to become a better handler and enable you to help your dog be the best he can be.

Physical Stress

Both Gryffin and Romeo were challenged by walking on slippery tiled floors in hospitals and nursing homes. Walking for an hour was strenuous on their limbs and they were not able to sit or lie down on these floors, so they had no rest during the visits. For therapy dogs, physical stress may be minimal. However, other working animals, such as police dogs, have greater physical challenges, jumping over fences, tracking a scent, apprehending criminals, etc.

Mental Stress

My dogs know that when they put their vests on, they are working and must pay attention to me. Being from Japan and speaking English all day long was exhausting for me at first. Following the commands for dogs must be like following a second language and would take certain mental focus. For guide dogs, they are not only trained to be obedient and follow commands but also trained in "intelligence disobedience." If they are given an unsafe command, they are taught to not obey it. For example, they must refuse to step out into the street when there is oncoming traffic.

Emotional Stress

My therapy dogs felt the same emotions I experienced while working at nursing homes. They also felt the emotions of the clients we visited and brought some of it back home with them, just like I did. Some search and rescue dogs are known to get depressed when they can't find survivors. They may be picking up on the frustrations of the handlers and the people around them.

Environmental Factors

Working dogs might also be exposed to some environmental factors that other dogs might not encounter. There was always a worry about exposing my dogs to de-icing chemicals used on sidewalks at hospitals and nursing homes in winter. Search and rescue dogs might be exposed to dust, smoke and debris which could contain harmful chemicals.

Ways to help your working dog

There are a number of therapies that can help working dogs manage stress. The following are therapies that can be beneficial.

Massage

Massage is one of the most powerful tools to improve the physical, emotional and mental health of working dogs. It induces a deep relaxation which creates a series of chemical reactions in the body. Relaxation causes the body to release endorphins which relieve stress and anxiety and can lead to an improved emotional outlook for your dog. Relaxed muscles, stimulated by massage, increase blood and lymph fluid circulation, aiding in the elimination of toxins and boosting the immune system. It also reduces pain and soreness, relieves tension, improves structural balance, increases flexibility and shortens recovery time from stren-



uous activities. It is a great joy to hear a dog let out a big sigh during a treatment.

Acupressure

Acupressure is based on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), just like acupuncture. Acupuncture uses needles while acupressure uses fingertip pressure to stimulate acupoints on energy pathways called meridians to balance Qi (life force energy) in the body. According to TCM, when the yin and yang in the body are balanced, Qi and blood flow smoothly in the meridians. In this balanced state, the body stays healthy. When imbalances occur due to stress, it can lead to illness and emotional issues. Both acupuncture and acupressure can be used to balance Qi in dogs, aiding the healing of the body, the mind and the spirit to achieve optimal health.

Reiki

Reiki is the universal life force energy that permeates all beings and is present in all of nature. It is a gentle, non-invasive holistic energy healing system that yields powerful results for the body, mind and spirit. It unlocks the inner flow of vital energy, restoring and balancing the energy systems in all living things. This natural healing system is complete and whole in and of itself, yet acts synergistically with all other healing methods.

What else can you do?

Get these treatments for yourself—your dog cannot do what he does without you, the handler. You and your dog are a team so please take care of yourself. As mentioned earlier, your dog can feel what you feel, so when you get these therapies and feel happy, balanced and relaxed, he feels it too.

Play—all work and no play isn't good for you or your dog. Take some time to have fun fetching tennis balls, throwing Frisbees or hiking. Take a break—take some time off from work. Your working dog sometimes needs time away from work to recuperate physically, mentally and emotionally.

My work has given me a great appreciation for the contributions working dogs and their handlers make to our society. Healing therapies can help keep working dogs happier, healthier and help them to live longer lives.

For more information, please contact Mino Fuller at 720-323-8971 or visit her website at www.handsonhounds.com.

GET OFF THE COUCH!

Come to...

Denver's Annual
Dog, Cat, Fish & Reptile Expo
All Under One Woof!



ONE DAY ONLY!

Saturday, May 19, 2012
10:00am – 6:00pm

National Western Complex
4655 Humboldt Street
Denver, CO 80216

Adults (at the door): \$8
Children 12 and under: \$3

Come with or without
your pet for a day of fun!

- Pet friendly vendors
- Pet entertainment
- Stage entertainment
- Pet fashion show
- Pet massage
- Behavioral specialists



Ravay Snow
Fine Pet Portraits

303-434-4960
ravay@comcast.net

www.ravaysnow.com or Facebook: Ravay Snow, Fine Artist

The perfect gift!

Call today to order a
custom-painted
portrait of your furry
family member!