



Paw Prints

Jodi Schneider McNamee
Columnist

What emotions do dogs feel?

You've caught the flu and you really feel poorly. Fido watches your every move and won't leave your side all day, which is out of the norm for him. Could he be feeling empathy?

Two recent studies are moving us closer than ever to a definite answer. In a UK study, two researchers at Goldsmiths College in London, Deborah Custance and Jennifer Mayer, set out to determine if dogs are capable of empathy. They designed a clever experiment to test whether a dog's behavior around apparently distressed people is consistent with empathy.

First they gathered a group of largely untrained dogs, mostly mixed breeds of both males and females. Then they set up a situation with the dog's pet parent and a stranger to the pooch. The pet parent and the stranger would alternately talk, cry, or hum a song.

The researchers wanted

to see how the dogs reacted. If the dogs felt empathy, they would be more likely to approach whoever was crying. The intervals of talking provided a baseline because low key human conversation is something that happens around dogs all the time, and that isn't usually much interest to them.

The dogs responded: 15 of the 18 in the study sought out the person in distress even if that person was the stranger.

"On the surface, it certainly seemed as if the dogs were demonstrating empathy," said Custance, who thought that if the dogs were seeking comfort for themselves they would go to their pet parent.

She admitted that the study raises other questions: What about other emotions, such as pleasure or anger?

There's no doubt that dogs have emotions. They feel joy after a job well done, and they feel sadness when another furry family member passes away.

Dogs even have the hormone oxytocin, which in humans is involved with feeling love and affection for others.

Most people routinely read emotions in their furry friends: a wagging tail when you arrive home means Fido's happy, or if his ears are back and he's crouching low to the ground with his tail tucked under, he's fearful. Another example could be when you're out on a walk and when another canine approaches, Fido freezes in place, his hackles raised, and he gives a low throaty growl,



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Anticipation is a strong emotion that dogs feel in the same manner as excitement.

at that point, you probably realize that your furry friend does not like the other dog, and he is angry.

However, it's important to remember that those emotions are different from those of adult humans. The feeling that dogs experience isn't connected to complex thoughts. Studies say they don't have ulterior motives or doubt. Their emotions are pure and honest.

Researchers have now come to believe that the mind of a dog is compared to that of a human who is two to two-and-a-half years old. The researchers' conclusion holds for most mental abilities as well as emotions.

Dogs seem to have an intuitive understanding of fair play, and become resentful if they feel that another dog is getting a better deal, a new

study has found. The study found that dogs are capable of feeling jealous or of judging fairness.

Friederike Range, a researcher at the University of Vienna in Austria, and her colleagues did a series of experiments that show that dogs will stop doing a simple task when not rewarded if another dog continues to be rewarded.

The experiment consisted of taking pairs of dogs and getting them to give a paw for a reward. On giving this "handshake" the dogs received a piece of food.

The dogs were normally happy to repeatedly give the paw, whether they got a reward or not.

But that all changed if they saw that another dog was being rewarded with a piece of food, while they received

nothing.

The dog without the reward quickly stopped doing the task, and showed signs of annoyance or stress when its partner was rewarded.

"Dogs show a strong aversion to unfairness," said Dr. Range, who conducted the study.

So what does this mean for people who live and interact with their furry friends?

The good news is that you can still feel free to dress your pooch in that silly costume for the Halloween parade, and he will not feel shame, regardless of how silly he might look. Your dog will also not feel pride at taking home the top prize in the talent contest. But your dog can consistently feel love for you and feel contentment from your company, and that's really the heart of the matter.



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