

# Debunking Myths

POPULAR DOG MYTHS DEBUNKED

**F R E E   E - B O O K**



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# Introduction

There are many fascinating dog myths out there – some passed down by generations of dog owners and professionals.

Since domesticated dogs have been around for centuries, it's only natural that these myths have developed.

But now that we know more about dog behaviour and the science behind learning, it's time to set the record straight for the health and safety of dogs and their owners.



# Table of Contents



## **Page 4**

Is Alpha Still Alpha?



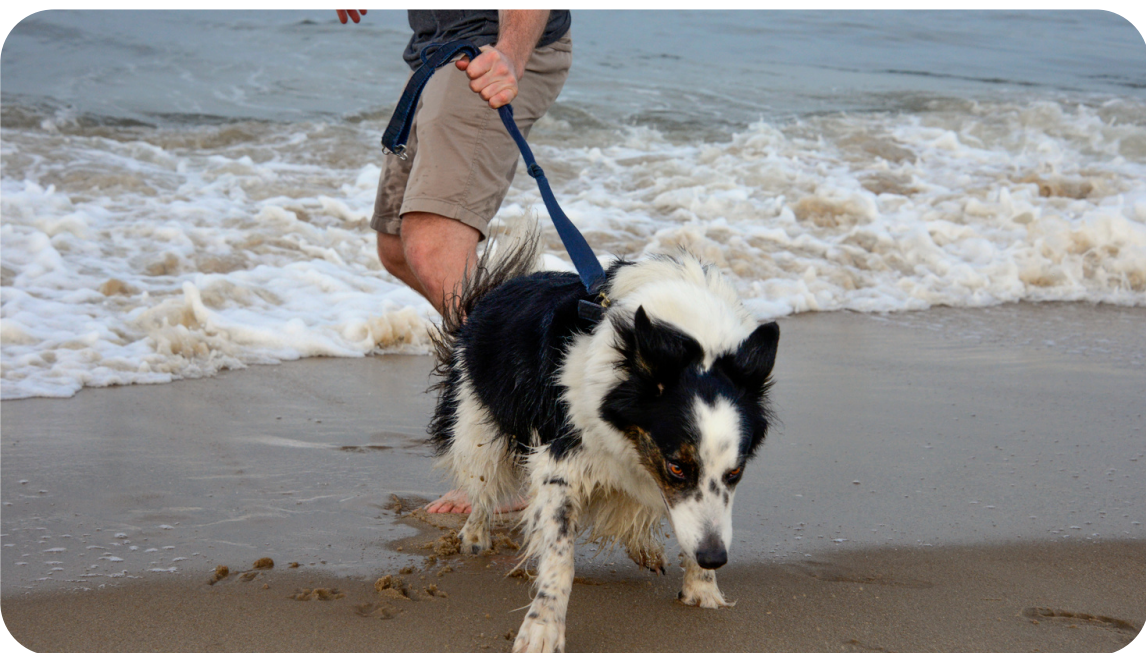
## **Page 6**

Does Helping them Hurt Them?



## **Page 7**

Dominance!



## **Page 8**

They'll Just Get Used To It.

# Is Alpha Still Alpha?



Let's first start with how the term Alpha came about in the world of dog training. Alpha originated a long time ago when Rudolph Schenkel, an animal behaviourist, studied wild wolves placed in zoo captivity. Zoos have come a long way since the 1930s, but back then, the wolves existed in a very unnatural habitat.

Just like your dog's behaviour can change when the environment changes, so did the wolves. They could not behave as they would normally, and when forced into this setting, the pack of wolves fought. Schenkel and his team concluded that the most successful fighter was the "Alpha."

But the problem was two-fold 1) the study was not representative of behaviour for wolves in a natural habitat and 2) captive wolves are not the same as domesticated dogs. That's right: our pet dogs are not wolves, captive or wild!

But do wild wolves act with aggression to lead their packs? In a word, "no."

Wolf behaviour experts have found just the opposite to be true. In fact, Dr. L. David Mech who helped popularize the term "alpha" in wolves, is on a mission to reverse the now outdated and misleading information.

# Is Alpha Still Alpha? Cont'd



Since wolf biologists no longer support the misuse of alpha, it's important for our domesticated dogs to benefit from the science, too!

If your dog walks out in front of you and is pulling hard, that's not being alpha. They're pulling for a variety of reasons, usually because we are pulling back just as hard. But why they are pulling could be over-arousal or perhaps they are so stressed out they are trying to escape the feel of the lead.

If your dog rushes out the door for the walk it's not to establish leadership on the walk. They are rushing out the door perhaps because they've not yet learned how to politely wait.

When your dog is reacting in a way that feels like they are trying to be "alpha," it just simply not true, nor does this line of thinking offer you solutions to the problem behaviour. Instead, take a minute to think about what your dog is responding to and why the behaviour is working for them. Then use the techniques you'll discover in our lessons to help change their feelings and their behaviour.

See behaviour with clarity and modern science and you'll have a key to success as you Reframe Reactivity for you and your dog.

# Does Helping them Hurt Them?



There is a myth in dog training that if you try to make a dog feel better while they are frightened or overreacting, you are teaching them to be more afraid.

To the contrary, if you are not helping your dog feel safe – to feel better in a situation and to do a different behaviour – there is a greater chance your dog's fears will increase. Additionally, there's a strong chance their behaviour will get worse!

For example, some people say picking up your little dog when they are frightened will only teach your dog to be more afraid. If your little dog feels better being picked up, then making them more afraid is simply not true. You may teach they can get picked up when they are afraid, but you will not teach them to be more afraid, especially if picking them up helps them.

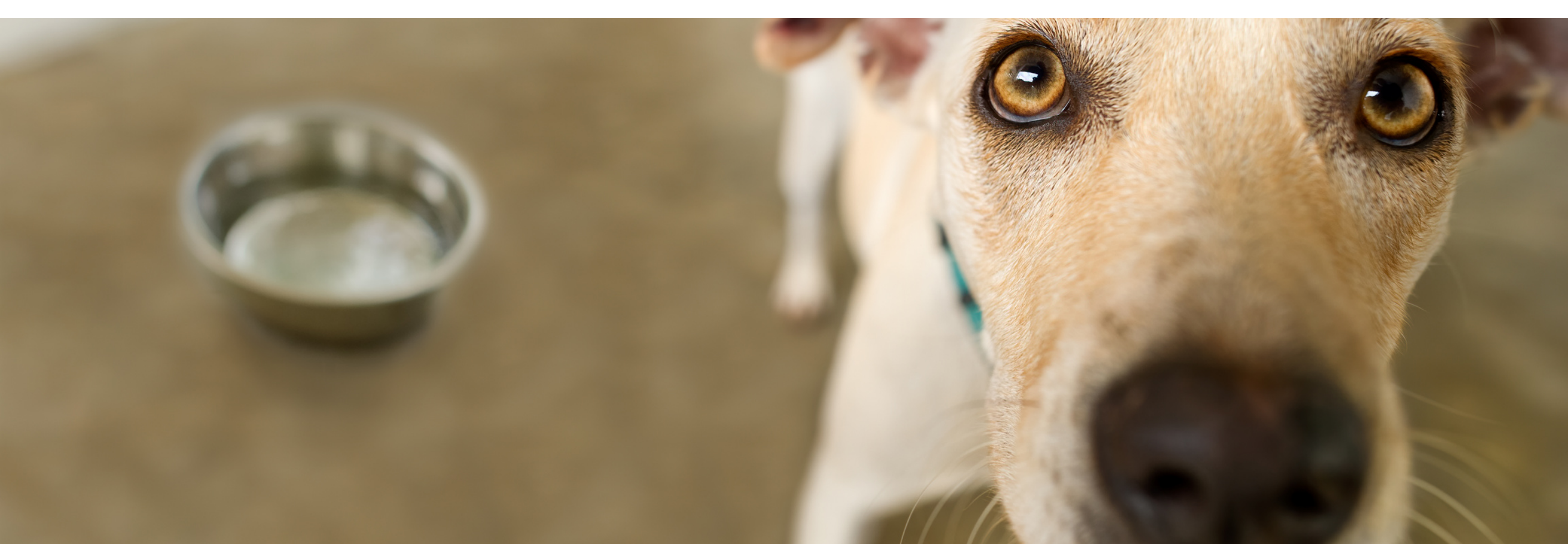
What if you have a big dog who is also afraid but picking them up is not an option? Same rule applies. Do something to help them feel better. Maybe that's delivering treats on the ground, maybe that's moving away for a good sniff, maybe that's going behind a car, hedge or a bin to gain space and distance from the trigger.

Standing still or forcing your dog to get close to something so they will stop being afraid has a high chance of increasing fear while also increasing over-reactive behaviour. Your dog is most likely going to try to make the scary thing go away which can escalate to barking, lunging, and even biting.

Now, if your dog seems to be in a on-going state of anxiety or stress, speak with your veterinarian sooner rather than later to help them feel better. This may involve medication, therapy, or other treatments that may be available.

When your dog is reacting with behaviours that indicate fear or anxiety, helping them is your first step. You will not be reinforcing fear; you will be reinforcing safety and building trust.

# Dominance



Along the lines of Alpha comes the misunderstood and misused terms, “dominant and dominance,” often used to describe a dog overreacting in a situation. Let’s explore this tricky term further as it pertains to you and your dog.

We start with understanding how behavioural responses always happen for a reason, seen or unseen. Dogs can behave without conscience intention, like panting when hot, or with a purpose, like sitting when getting a treat. But how they behave or respond in any given moment does not define who they are in totality as a dog.

Dogs can and sometimes do dominate resources like food, toys or spaces meaning they do not want to share the resource or they want to maintain control over the resource; they may want to control who has access to their food dish, or favorite toy, or comfy bed out of fear or concern of losing that resource. But that does not make them 'dominant dogs' as a stand-alone personality trait.

Within this myth is that your dog is lunging or barking to show dominance over a trigger. When it comes to reactivity, that kind of behaviour is usually rooted in feeling unsafe versus feeling confidently powerful. The intent is usually to make the scary thing go away.

Another misconception is that you must be show your dog you are the dominant one. As benevolent guardians or pet parents, you already control your dog’s resources of safe shelter, food and water. You can dictate when walks happen, when food appears, access to toys or other resources. You can exhibit control by helping them experience less triggers, by guiding them to gain distance, or giving them incredible treats to reward desired behaviours. That sounds like either a lot of dominance or good old-fashioned care for your dog.

Some might say your dog is acting out because you are not displaying your dominance over them. Although it's not always this simple, dogs basically look for safety from us. They want to trust us, not fear us.

The myth that your dog is on a power trip when it comes to over reactivity does a disservice to understanding them and why they are behaving. Making the time to learn more with this book is a wonderful start to reframing and perhaps renaming reactivity.

# They'll Get Used To It



Another popular myth is one that your dog will just get used to whatever it is they're afraid of. Now this can and sometimes does happen. Your dog acclimates or habituates or naturally becomes desensitized to whatever was initially worrisome. But this is not always the case and it's important to know when to allow your dog to "get used to it" and when to intervene.

The key is knowing your dog's body language. If your dog is overwhelmed by their environment, they may "shut down" which can look like a dog who is calm but who is so overwhelmed they suppress behaviour. Once out of that situation, you may see a shake off and other changes in body language that tell you your dog is comfortable again.

If your dog is free to leave the trigger but chooses to remain close with body language that communicates comfort, then you know your dog might be up for the challenge of getting used to it.

What is comfortable behaviour? You want to look for normal breathing, movement like walking at their normal pace, sitting with an open mouth and soft body or lying in the shape of a "C." Perhaps you'll see your dog move back a little, continues to remain relaxed, and then takes a casual step forward. This might repeat a few times before they choose to sniff or move on. If on a lead, you'll want to make sure you are not forcing your dog closer, but rather watching them choose to investigate in this way.

It is important to empower your dog to learn confidence, have curiosity and self-control naturally and on their own. Just make sure the time spent "getting used to something" is indeed progressing for the better!



# Want to Learn More?



Hi, I'm Claire Arrowsmith, a Certificated Clinical Animal Behaviourist. I've been helping pets and their people since 2000.

My methods aim to repair and rebuild your relationship with your dog with techniques that are both scientifically sound and welfare friendly. I use positive options aimed to help your animal feel more relaxed and safe and avoid all prod, smack, jerk or shock approaches.

If this approach makes sense to you and you'd like to learn more about ways to help your dog's behaviour, please make contact to arrange an appointment.

## Contact Me

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