

The “Be Still” Exercise by Brenda Aloff – A Useful Tool for Working Dog Handlers

By Deborah Palman

Last winter, at the invitation of New England K-9 Search and Rescue, I and other police K-9 and SAR dog handlers attended a seminar in Keene NH by Brenda Aloff. The material she presented was fascinating and a novel approach to training dogs. She has spent her career observing dog behavior, cataloging and analyzing it, and has come up with new training techniques that recognize that dogs operate in both thinking and “instinctual” modes. Her methods also emphasize communicating with dogs using the ways dogs communicate with each other.

The first technique she taught was the “Be Still” exercise. On one level, this exercise teaches the dog to calm itself and accept the person handling the dog. On another level, she described the exercise as a means of taking the dog out of an instinctual, reactive, “hindbrain” state into a thinking, “frontbrain” state. This is very useful for dog trainers and handlers, because if the dog is in a fearful or avoidance state, it is impossible to teach the dog anything and hard to get the dog out of the fear state. Aggression, whether motivated by prey or defensive, is also a hindbrain state, which is why it can be hard for trainers to control or teach control to a dog that is fully aroused.

I’ve spend considerable time reading Brenda’s books and find them fascinating but complex. This is because the subject of dog behavior and trying to modify it with all the differing variables of dogs and problems is also complex. Basically, the books point out that the ideal human dog relationship is such that the human is the pack leader and the dog “includes” the human’s input in their decisions. This is achieved by training the dog to be mindful of the human pack leader at all times. This teaching has to be done when the dog is in a “frontbrain” or learning, thinking and calm state of mind. The dog cannot be taught when it is in a hindbrain, adrenalized, emotional state like fear or aggression. The trick is to teach to dog to look for permission the second it sees the rabbit rather than trying to stop the dog after the dog has left on the chase. By the time the dog has left, it is deep in hindbrain, instinctual behavior and cannot be taught. In apprehension work, the analogy is clear – the dog must be taught to listen to the handler before the dog is taught to fight all out with the decoy.

When to Use “Be Still”

The Be Still exercise is used to calm the dog, connect with the dog and to switch the dog from hindbrain to frontbrain. I have used it primarily in situations where the dog was being fearful, and experimented with situations where an apprehension trained dog would not “out.” The reasons dogs don’t out are complex, but generally they are due to stress or a hindbrain, adrenalized state that cannot be changed and is usually only aggravated with traditional physical corrections. Because working with a dog in an aggressive state can be hazardous, don’t try to apply this exercise at aggression training sessions without knowing you can handle the dog without being bitten. I have found that the Be Still exercise does help dogs to release when they are deep in a prey bite fixation.

Be Still used alone won't help the dog to learn the out, but it may help to get the dog into a state of mind where other training techniques can be used.

Where I have used the Be Still exercise with seeming miraculous results has been with phobias and fear behaviors. Once a dog becomes convinced something is to be feared, it is hard to change their mind. Of course, we try to pick working dogs that are not prone to fear or avoidance, but at times unfortunate experiences occur and dogs learn to be afraid of things they shouldn't be afraid of. If a handler can apply the Be Still technique early in the dog's learning, or even perhaps later, often the fear and avoidance behavior can be instantly "unlearned."

I can give two examples: In one, I found that my young female German Shepherd, who is normally unaffected by the environment, had troubles with shiny linoleum floors. It took awhile to recognize the problem because it wasn't so much that the floor was slippery but that the floor had shine when the sun was shining outside. On dark days, I didn't see the problem, but it would suddenly re-appear later on sunny days. We were doing detector work in a building and she would walk like she was on egg shells on the sunny days and suddenly became reluctant to work. Using food to lure her on the floor helped a little, but she would not break out of the fear state long enough to have a lasting effect.

Since I had learned to use the Be Still exercise and had seen Brenda bring shelter dogs out of a fear state and was told by Brenda it could be used for this, I used it on my female GSD. I did the exercise for about 3 minutes the first time until she relaxed while standing on the problem floor. This would indicate that the dog had been desensitized to simply standing on the floor.

Then, having seen Brenda do something similar at the seminar, I deliberately pulled my dog around on the floor until she was up on her toenails and acting fearful again. The dragging around added more stress to the situation and brought her back into a fearful or hindbrain state. I did the Be Still again until she relaxed. After she relaxed, I took a deep breath myself, let her go and threw food treats all around the floor as she chased after the treats and snapped them up. Later I used a toy she could chase. I have not seen the floor problem with her since. Since I don't go in all sorts of buildings regularly, the problem may crop up in a different building, but it appears to be fixed in that building, at least.

I saw a similar problem when I was training some civilian dogs in an upstairs loft with unfinished floors and walls. There was a gap between the plywood floor and the outside walls about a foot in width. When the dogs got near the hole, they suddenly became phobic and wouldn't go near the hole or heel with their handlers within 10 feet of the hole. Attempts to lure or pull the dog near the hole just made the phobia worse. Trying the Be Still exercise, we took the dogs close enough to the hole so that they were tense and pulling back and applied the technique. When the dogs were fully relaxed under the technique, the handler let go of the dog. Both dogs walked up to the hole, sniffed it and never looked back. The hole was never an issue for either after that.

Pressing the Reset Button

It helps to think of the Be Still exercise as pressing the "reset" button on a piece of machinery. Using and completing (meaning using it until the dog relaxes) the exercise

resets the dog from its fear state back into a normal, thinking state of mind. From that point on, it is up to the handler or trainer to decide how to teach the dog.

The dog has to be in the fearful state for it to work, otherwise the exercise doesn't "reset" or desensitize anything. I would use it on the edge of the fear first because a large dog might be hard to control if it is in a real panic, then get closer to the fearful situation again to desensitize more of it. While traditional training works to desensitize very slowly in small amounts, this exercise seems to work relatively quickly even when the dog is in a deep fear state.

Why or how does it work? Brenda couldn't really explain why or how it works, just that it does. It may be that the dog can't concentrate on two things at once, and the fear state and massage or "pressure" of the exercise can't exist in the dog's mind at the same time, so the pressure of the exercise wins out. Or perhaps it just releases enough of the dog's stress so that the dog can think and learn again.

Practice the Exercise Before You Need It

Handlers should practice the exercise before they need it because practice gets the dog and handler accustomed to the exercise. As the handler practices it, the dog will relax quicker and quicker until just taking hold of the dog and starting to massage will relax the dog. It is also an extremely valuable exercise to teach the dog to accept handling for grooming and health issues. If the dog has areas where the handler senses resistance to touch, these areas should be massaged and worked into during the Be Still exercise. A complete description of how to do this is given in Brenda Aloff's book, Get Connected with Your Dog.

The Be Still Exercise

The following is a direct quote from Brenda Aloff's book, Get Connected with Your Dog:

"This is the first *desensitizing* exercise in this protocol. This is the exercise you will revert to again and again as you do the other exercises. In addition to the many other benefits of this exercise (refer to the table in *The Get Connected Protocol: Improve the Relationship by using Bodywork & Space: Encouraging Teamwork and Developing Trust & Respect* on Page 197), it is also used as a way to signal that an approximation has ended and this is the "rest period" before we begin another approximation.

- **Hold our dog's collar with one hand.**
- **With your other hand rub our dog all over.**
- **Use a FLAT HAND and a FIRM Touch.**
- **Begin with a benign area, easily accepted by most dogs, such as the rib cage and back.**
- **DO NOT stop the "rubbing the dog all over thing" until TWO things happen:**
 1. **The dog's feet STOP MOVING.**

2. In addition, *once the feet are still*, at least ONE of the following must ALSO be present:
the dog licks his lips
blinks his eyes
takes a deeper breath
or his feet are still for a count of five.
- A short and quiet Marker such as “Yes” is okay at this point if you like, but the more silent you are the better it is. Certainly do not indulge yourself in a lot of chatter. Really, all the chit chat is all about you. Shut up! Another valid reason for silence is that the majority of handlers do not Mark the behavior at the right moment, or drag the Marker out too long by saying, “Yes, good girl,” or something similar. A “click” at this point makes many dogs look for a treat, which can really disrupt the flow of this work. Many dogs have been taught that “good” or “yes” is an End Working Cue. If this is the case with your dog it will really interrupt the flow of the behavior.
 - Stand up, as you have been bending over the dog to rub his body. Count to 2.
 - Begin another trial (repetition of the exercise) using well-tolerated areas of the dog’s body.
 - Eventually you should be able to rub the dog’s legs, face, pick up the feet, etc. There should be no No Go areas.
 - With a highly aroused or dog who dislikes being controlled in any way, at first the still feet may be fleeting, and you need ask only for a couple of seconds as long as you see one of the other observable signals, such as lip licking. These indicate that the dog is “trying” to come from Hindbrain to Frontbrain. Once the dog’s feet are still and a Frontbrain signal criterion has been exhibited; STOP rubbing the dog IMMEDIATELY, by lifting your hand off the dog.”

This is only a basic description of the exercise. The key is to STOP rubbing when the dog releases stress. A stress release is signaled by a lick lip (most common), by a big sigh or long breath, by a relaxing of muscles and by other signals. A yawn or shake off where the dog shakes are signals of a deeper stress release and often signal when the exercise can stop for good. The “release of pressure” (rubbing) when the dog releases stress is what teaches the dog that releasing stress by relaxing and being calm is a good thing. I found that it really helps to have a coach standing off to one side the first few times a handler does this with a dog to see the signals and to remind the handler to stop rubbing. The lip lick is often quick and hard to see from above the dog without practice. To resolve fear issues, this exercise should be done until the dog relaxes completely.

Try the exercise and see what it can do for you. I suspect that it has a number of uses that are not mentioned in the book. The full reference for Brenda’s book is:

Aloff, Brenda. *Get Connected With Your Dog: Emphasizing the Relationship While Training Your Dog*. 2007. 396 pages. Available from Dogwise, 701B Poplar, Box 2778, Wenatchee, WA 98807-2778, Orders at 1-800-776-2665 or www.dogwise.com.

