

What's Stress Got to Do with It?
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As the breeder and/or owner handler of multiple performance basenjis, I've been asked to share some thoughts regarding managing basenji mental health. In thinking about how I manage my basenjis in the few minutes before any competition, I realized anything I did during this time was such a minuscule part of their whole performance process. Managing their mental health begins from the time I pick them up from another breeder or they are born in my home and becomes a never ending process; it starts with the introduction of mild stressors, progresses towards effective socialization and ideally continues throughout the dog's life via continued positive mental stimulation.

Stress might be defined as the brain's response to any internal or external factor, good **or** bad, which causes disruption of the brain's metabolic balance causing physical changes such as increased heart and respiration rates. Blood levels of much needed "fight or flight" hormones also rise, flooding the brain, creating an unfavorable environment for both learning and performing.

There are two classifications of stress: distress and eustress. Distress is defined as "extreme anxiety, sorrow, or pain"; being distressed would never be an ideal mental state for our companion animals as it can result in "negative coping" behaviors such as separation anxiety, aggression, hyperactivity and/or destructive behavior, not to mention ill health. Eustress, however, is defined as "moderate or normal psychological stress interpreted as being **beneficial** for the experiencer". An example of eustress could be rewards based training where the dog is mildly stressed during the learning process but is simultaneously being rewarded with something it enjoys, such as food or toys.

Stress, such as the fight or flight response, is only intended to last a short period of time during an emergency; chronic stress or worse, chronic **overreaction** to stress without periods of recovery, can wreak havoc on our canine partners health; decreases to their immune system, depression/anxiety, and/or suppression of their reproductive systems are but a few problems. One veterinary behavior clinic noted on their website that "anxious or reactive dogs were more than **twice** as likely to have chronic health issues such as allergies or gastrointestinal issues than those in our obedience or sport training programs."

Our goal as owners and/or breeders should **never** be to completely avoid stress. If distress can inhibit learning, then eustress can actually enhance it, therefore the success of any training program will be dependent on a dog's ability to react appropriately to each of these two types of stress.

The first step starts with the breeder, who should be exposing their litters to mild stressors, the premise behind Dr. Carmen L. Battaglia's "Early Neurological Stimulation" (revised) article; experiments have shown puppies exposed to mild stressors then allowed to adequately recover between stress events have the needed ability to respond better to everyday stress at maturity.

The second step is implementing effective socialization. It is believed genetics are roughly 35% responsible for a dog's lifetime ability to perform, which leaves 65% to "everything else"; that everything else is first within the control of the breeder, then with the owner. Puppies lacking early stimulation will be at a severe disadvantage, up to and including, the inability to ever reach maximum potential. To reach full effect however early stimulation by the breeder **must** be followed by a lifelong commitment of socialization and habituation by the new owner.

Socialization can best be described as controlled, positive exposure to a variety of people, places and things such as different species (cats, birds or pocket pets), other friendly dogs, sudden loud noises, various substrates, etc., to which any puppy might come into contact with throughout its lifetime as our companion and/or performance animals. The primary purpose of socializing should be to strengthen a dog's ability to cope with every day stressors, improve their social skills, and to learn how to be comfortable living within our chaotic human world.

Research on wolf pups showed despite extensive socializing during the optimum window (birth to 14 weeks of age), once human interaction was withdrawn, the ability for these pups to continue to have lifelong benefit of socialization was **lost**; however adult captive wolves, extensively socialized to man for a period of 6 months did **not** lose their socializing capacity once human interaction ceased; therefore while it is important for the breeder to create positive socializing experiences for the pups individually, without any emotional support of litter mates, it is even **more** important for owners to continue this process (also individually without support of canine siblings) to some degree **well** into adult hood for the longest lasting benefits.

Proper socialization will ideally segue to a habituated basenji; habituated to mean the basenji, after periods of positive exposure to stimuli will stop reacting/responding to it. Proper socializing experiences is not visiting dog parks or attending "free for all" puppy classes where pups run amok with each other, ignoring the humans. Firstly, these experiences are not controlled; secondly the experiences might not always be positive for the puppy and can actually have an opposite long term negative effect which the owner fails to recognize and thirdly, if the experiences actually **are** positive, it teaches the pup the wrong things to focus on.

By wrong I mean, while I want my basenjis positively acclimated to new people, places and things, what I really want are my basenjis to be habituated to these things and cease reaction or response to them. I want my basenjis to look upon people and especially other dogs as being part of the environment to which they should **ignore** vs. being something they actively want to interact with. Once I become the primary focus, performance related behaviors usually fall into place.

Mental health management is not just about socializing your basenji outside of the home. Mental exercise within the home is also important to prevent destructive behaviors due to boredom or anxiety due to spending time alone. Have you ever had a day so mentally invigorating, all you have the energy to do is kick off your shoes at the end of the day before sinking exhausted onto the couch? Why does this kind of day seem to kick our butts far more than any physical exercise we might engage in? In fact, assuming we are well conditioned for it, physically busy days will be more apt to **energize** us than wear us out; the same holds true for dogs. Mental exhaustion comes from exercising the mind.

Understandably, owners tend to focus on the physical aspect of keeping their basenjis in condition while underworking their brains, which serves to increase their physical stamina while doing nothing for their mental stamina. As we all know, basenjis can run and play for hours at a stretch while never seeming to tire. I have found though, if you work their little minds for 5 to 10 minutes once to twice daily, they'll nap the afternoon away.

What are some ways to effectively exercise your basenji's brain? Obedience: teach your basenji to sit, down, stand, stay, and come. Tricks: teach your basenji fun things like shake paws, sit up and beg, or take a bow. Puzzles: there are a number of puzzles on the market which encourage your basenji to figure out how to get food rewards which helps to stimulate the

mind. In the beginning make the puzzle easy so your basenji is successful. Success will equate to a basenji willing to continue to play the game. Scent work: play the "shell game" by allowing your basenji to see you place a piece of kibble under a paper cup. Once he gets the hang of finding it under one cup, add two more cups but only hide a treat under one; once that has been figured out, start moving the cups around so the treat is never in the same place. Another easy game is "scatter feeding", scatter a couple handfuls of kibble throughout the yard and have your basenji "hunt" in the grass for his kibble.

The end result; A tired basenji with a happy owner, working together towards developing a well-balanced companion who learns to compensate for stress without suffering any long term physical or mental consequences; the ultimate goal no matter if you have a champion couch potato or the next Agility star.