

## **Exercising Self Control— it's more than a metaphor.**

By Janeen McMurtrie

Self control is the measure of an animal's ability to control its emotions and desires, the ability to override impulse to obtain a delayed reward. Self control is important in social interactions because it allows animals to alter their behavior to follow rules, maintain social bonds and cooperate with others.

The strength model of self control<sup>1</sup> states that:

- Self control is a limited resource. As you use it, you deplete your resources.
- When your stockpile of self control is depleted, your ability to exercise it decreases.
- Self control can be restored by rest, nutrition and positive emotions.
- Like a muscle, if you use it regularly and well, your self control gets stronger over time.
- Other high level mental functions use the same set of resources that self control relies on.

So what does this have to do with dog training? Everything! Exercising self control is the basis of good social behavior, and most problem dog behavior is rooted in a lack of it.

How do you help a dog learn to exercise his self control? First, remember that it's a limited resource. If it's late in the day and the dog is tired, stressed out, or has already had a lot of mental exercise, give him a break. He's operating on a short fuse. Don't tempt fate by lighting it.

Second, make sure he gets regular mental exercise. Letting a dog do whatever he wants whenever he wants allows his self control to atrophy. It turns him into a mental couch potato. To keep a dog's self control strong, you need to work with him every day.

Third, give your dog plenty of rest and good nutrition. A weak, thirsty or hungry dog is a stressed dog—and stress depletes vital mental resources. If your home is loud and chaotic, give the dog a quiet place to rest and recuperate. Feed him the right amount of good quality food. Make sure he has plenty of clean, fresh water.

Fourth, remember that other mental functions draw on the same reserves needed for self-control. This is one of the many reasons why it's important to maintain a consistent set of rules and boundaries. Once following these rules becomes a habit, they draw far less on his reserves.

These other mental functions are also important because they give us opportunities to cross train a dog's powers of self control. Studies have shown that when human beings make efforts to control themselves in one part of their lives—even simple ones like maintaining good posture, using proper grammar or using a non-dominant hand to do simple exercises—their ability to exercise self control in difficult situations increases in a measureable way.

It isn't unusual for clients to tell me that they don't want to bother teaching their dog those pointlessly complicated, time-consuming formal obedience exercises. They just want Fifi to quit attacking the mailman. But research shows that this kind of work is important. Training Fifi to sit and heel accurately, come to a straight front, wait to be released at the door, navigate obstacles and other seemingly unrelated tasks helps her build up the self control resources she needs to resist the lure of the mailman's oh-so-tempting ankles.

Research also shows that the mental processes involved in making choices uses the same resources as those that control our powers of self-control.<sup>2</sup> Physical exercise has also been documented to improve high level mental processes like those involved in exercising self-control.<sup>3</sup>

This points to one of the great, and I think previously unrecognized, strengths of the “Nothing in Life is Free” or NILIF programs—because when we implement them properly, we take away many of the dog’s opportunities to make choices, leaving more resources available for executing self control. Think of NILIF as a self control savings account.

So, science shows us that a combination of regular physical and mental exercise and consistent practice of self-discipline combined with rest and good nutrition can help make you—and your dog—more cooperative, less reactive and better able to resist temptation. And based on my experience—it works.

Last fall foster dog Charlie arrived at our place. The first time I met Charlie, he shrank back and gave me the evil eye. The first time he met my husband, he threw a tantrum. The first time I tried to leash him up and take him out of his kennel, he tried to bite me. Charlie snarked and snarled at any dog that came near him and he went ballistic if you tried to groom him. He also had stunningly creative eliminatory habits.

I put Charlie on a strict NILIF program. The boy worked to earn every crumb of food he ate, every bit of a walk, every toss of a ball and every iota of attention he got. He had to navigate mental and physical obstacles in structured exercises every day. He ate high quality dog food and there was always clean water in his kennel. He got plenty of rest and exercise and I made sure I didn’t overtax his resources.

Today Charlie lives in the house. He runs loose with our dogs, our chickens and our guests. He cheerfully lets us brush him, trim his nails, clean his ears and brush his teeth. He’s gone from being a horrid little dog to being a very likable pet, and I didn’t need a magic wand or behavior modifying drugs to get him there.

Increasing a dog’s ability to exercise self-control is the key to solving many behavior problems. Current research supports the old-fashioned idea that a combination of NILIF, obedience training and proper rest, nutrition and physical exercise is the key to improving a dog’s ability to use this vital resource.

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1 Baumeister, Roy F., Vohs, Kathleen D., and Tice, Dianne M. (2007), “The Strength Model of Self Control”, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

2 Baumeister, Roy F., Sparks, Erin A., Stillman, Tyler F. and Vohs, Kathleen D. (2007), “Free will in consumer behavior: Self-control, ego depletion, and choice”, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

3 Aamodt, Sandra and Wang, Sam (November 8, 2007), “Exercise on the Brain”, *The New York Times*.