

What my rescue dog taught me

When psychotherapist Hilda Burke adopted a retired racing greyhound, she had no idea how challenging it would be. Magically, training her new pet from scratch gave her insight into how we can train our own minds

Eleven months ago, I adopted a retired racing greyhound. This followed a period of mourning for my beloved dog, Charlie.

Through Charlie, I had developed an affinity for greyhounds – a refined and heraldic breed, often referred to as ‘40 mph couch potatoes’.

Initially, Madra was as docile as Charlie. He even had to be woken up in the morning, in contrast to Charlie who would come whimpering to my door at dawn. Madra’s teeth would chatter when you stroked his belly or tickled him under his chin. On busy London streets, he cantered along beautifully at my heel, and not even a discarded fried chicken bone could tempt him off course.

A few weeks into our cohabitation, on a quiet Thames-side path, I fastened a muzzle on Madra and unclipped his lead for the first time.

As I heard the ‘clack’ of the fastener, I realised my mistake. He bolted off with me in ungainly pursuit. My top speed is around 10 mph, so he was out of sight quickly. I heard him before I saw him: aggressive barking followed by heart-piercing yelping, punctuated by a jumble of swearing and shouting. Hastening towards the scene, I passed an abandoned red muzzle, and saw Madra chasing a small fluffy creature. Somehow, I extracted him from the melee.

Luckily, the little dog was fine, and the owner very tolerant when I explained that Madra was a recent rescue. And so I turned my attention to my own predicament as the owner of a potential killer – of small fluffy dogs at least. This had not been my plan. This is how my clients often come into therapy – things haven’t panned out how they imagined. They’re 40 and single. They’re 28 and living with their >>>



>>> parents. They're 50 and unemployed. And so, like many of my clients, I turned to Google to find someone who could help me. My resources were failing me. I needed a professional. I made a call and arranged our first training session.

Lesson one

Life doesn't always (ever) go according to plan.

I WAS ALL for this training business but wished I wasn't starting out from where I was – with a dog with a high prey drive: It resonated with some of my therapy work. Just before this, I was reflecting with a client on her progress in tackling anxiety. While recognising how far she had come, she sighed that she wished she didn't have to try quite so hard and that she simply hadn't the issue to begin with. An important part of any therapy is to accept your own starting point; this I knew theoretically, but I had hit a blind spot in my own situation.

Lesson two

Wishing you were starting from a different place is futile.

I FELT PESSIMISTIC during our first training session. Madra didn't heed any of my commands. What the trainer shared with me, however, changed my whole way of thinking about our 'issue'. He explained that a dog such as Madra was brought into the world for one reason only: to race as fast as he could after a small furry creature and catch it. Upon attainment of this goal, he would have been rewarded by his owner. In fact, this would possibly have been the only time he received praise or attention.

I felt an overwhelming empathy for Madra. I was treating as a terrible negative a learned behaviour that humans previously responded to and rewarded as a positive thing.

The parallel between my clients'

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struggles and what I was facing with my dog was keenly felt. Our parents raise and nurture us in the best way they see fit for us to prosper, and we try and adapt to fit their model. Some excel at this and these are the ones who usually have the most difficult time when moving from the family unit into the wider world. Just like a retired greyhound that knows how to win the race, but struggles to adapt outside of that framework.

Through this different lens, I could see Madra as a 'very good boy', one that had learned what would best please his master. Understanding gained by insight into a person's past is crucial for everyone undergoing therapy. Without this compassion, it's incredibly hard to do the work together.

Lesson three

Acknowledging the past and its impact can help you move forward.

AFTER OUR FIRST session with the dog trainer, I was content that I had moved from a place of struggle to one of acceptance and things were looking up. That was, until a week later, when I was diligently doing my training with Madra in the dog exercise area. Seeing another dog owner about to enter the area with his animal, I yelled at the man to wait for a moment. Oblivious to my plea, he

liberated his dog. Naturally, I shouted at Madra, 'Stay!' Ignoring me and aware that something interesting must be afoot to warrant such exuberance on my part, he spotted the new 'intruder', a small, fluffy dog – oh no, just his type! And so Madra bounded forward like a bat out of hell until he was upon the other dog. Eventually, I prised Madra off his quarry. Unfortunately, his actions this time necessitated a trip to the vet for the other animal for a check-up and a tranquilliser, something this traumatised dog owner could have benefited from, too.

I felt utterly defeated by this event. What was the point in investing time and money training my dog if I was condemning myself to a lifetime of anxious park trips and vet's bills to right his wrongs? Dejected, I called



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Madra's trainer to ask for advice.

He reminded me that to change a dog like Madra would take lots more time and effort and I needed to exercise more patience with him. He asked me to describe Madra's behaviour during the rest of the week. I fed back that Madra had been responding very well to his

obedience training and waiting to eat his dinner until I told him that he could eat. He was making progress in those areas. In the 'heat of the chase', I had forgotten about all of his other achievements and successes. It dawned on me that the training was as much about changing my own mindset as it was about changing Madra's behaviour. *I was more the trainer's 'client' than Madra was!*

Looking at things 'as a whole' is one of the most important things I do as a therapist. My clients are well acquainted with their 'flaws' and their antennae are wired for any screw-ups. They're so used to beating themselves up that they fail to recognise the small achievements and victories that coexist with the perceived 'failings'. It's important

to acknowledge these steps forward, as they can help put the 'steps back' in perspective.

Lesson four

Taking a step back does not mean that you have failed.

LIKE MY CLIENTS with me, Madra and I had only one hour a week with our trainer. If we had limited our work to that, we wouldn't have come very far. We spent many hours repeating exercises aimed at improving his recall and obedience. We persevered through rainy days, cold days and lazy days. At times, it felt relentless.

I never again let him off the lead unmuzzled – but, one day, Madra found the front door ajar and made a bid for freedom. On the third yell, and as he was about to reach a busy road, something unexpected happened: he listened. Stopping dead in his tracks, he gambolled joyously back into my arms – those hours of work had paid off! But what really struck me was his attitude – he sprinted back to me with as much a feeling of joy and 'freedom' as he had when he escaped.

With clients, it often feels the same at the start, uneasy and tedious, our minds resistant to change old habits. What's wonderful to see is that one day clients begin to find joy in their new way of being. It ceases to be such an effort – and, much like Madra in returning to me, there can be freedom and joy in new behaviour. No therapist can make that happen for the client, much as no trainer could have saved Madra as he hurtled towards the road. The best thing a therapist, or indeed a dog trainer, can do is hand the reins of responsibility to the client, giving them the tools to ensure their safety but, ultimately, the client does the work – to retrain their mind as I retrained mine, and my dog.

Lesson five

Experts can be helpful but only you can really make a difference.