

Myth 44: A dog can/can't be jealous.

If we want to know whether a dog can be jealous, we first have to take a good look at what we mean by “jealous.” If jealousy means being afraid something will be taken away from her when someone else is around, or if it means anxiety that the other’s presence is going to mean an unpleasant experience (like less attention or being sent away), or if jealousy means worry that the other will get a treat instead of herself, then a dog can be jealous. Biologists will call this projection and anthropomorphism, but that’s because biologists aren’t psychologists and don’t really understand what *human* jealousy is.

Excerpt from, [*The 100 Silliest Things People Say About Dogs*](#), by animal behaviorist Alexandra Semyonova.

Learn more at Semyonova’s website: [*Nonlinear Dogs*](#).

Here are some examples:

1. Your dog is normally allowed to sit next to you on the couch, but now you have a new boyfriend or girlfriend. Every time the two of you sit on the couch, the dog tries to join you to share in the cosiness, just like she always does when you settle down alone to watch TV after work. After you’ve sent her away six times in the presence of your new friend, the dog starts to act withdrawn whenever this friend shows up. The dog has learned, just as a human can, that this person’s presence means something she values will be withheld from her. We could call this jealousy, just as we would if we were talking about a three-year-old child who rejected your new friend for the same reason.
2. You’ve just brought a new puppy into the house. You’re worried about what your adult dog will do. In your worry, you tend to be a bit grouchy toward your adult dog when the pup is in the room, you prevent her from parenting the pup and teaching him the social rules (e.g., you demand that she “share the bone fairly” with the pup), or you send her away when she tries to teach the pup by growling at him. The pup gets lots of special treats and extra attention, which the adult dog doesn’t get to share. The adult dog learns, just like the jealous human, that the other – in this case, the pup – is a signal that unpleasant things will happen. She begins to act as if she doesn’t like the pup, refusing to let him get near her or even chasing him out of the room. Wanting the other to go away because bad things happen in his presence and because you aren’t allowed to be yourself when the other is around is an emotion we can call jealousy.
3. If you live alone with a single dog, your dog doesn’t know what will happen when you hand out treats with other dogs around. If you get out a treat in a dog park, she may be defensive toward other dogs who are attracted by the sight of a treat, snarling at them and trying to get them to go away. She’ll stop doing this once she learns that she will still get her treat, even if other dogs are crowding around, too. The fear that someone else will get a valued thing instead of you is another emotion that dogs can share with humans, and that we can call jealousy in both.

What it comes down to is that another person or dog can become a signal that the satisfaction of a need is in danger. The truth is that “jealousy” is a kind of extinction aggression, both in humans and in the dog (see Myth 58, paragraph 6).

It’s a good thing to acknowledge that a dog can have feelings of impending loss and can learn not to like the thing that signals this loss. But it’s important not to take this too far, because then we do get into mythical thinking. Jealous humans can sit around brooding for days about what someone else has that they don’t have themselves, coming up with all kinds of sneaky or complicated plans to get back at the other person, cut them down a notch, show them a thing or two. This is a kind of jealousy dogs can’t have. They don’t have the large frontal lobes where this kind of brooding and planning takes place in our brains. They don’t worry obsessively about the other if the other isn’t present, and they can’t think up complicated plans about what they’ll do tomorrow or next week. This kind of jealousy is a strictly human capacity.

So why does a dog sometimes stay withdrawn even after the new friend or the pup has gone home again? She refuses to get on the couch with you now that you are inviting her, she doesn’t want the bone you offer her now. Is she jealously pouting? Is she trying to punish and reject you back out of jealousy? The answer is no. She is hesitant because you just sent her away ten times, or you just took the bone away from her ten times. She isn’t sure why you did that. She thinks maybe the rules have changed, so she is holding back until she figures out what the new rules in your relationship are. She’s not “jealous”, she’s just confused.

Fact: “Jealousy” is, both in dogs and in humans, a reaction to a signal that predicts loss or exclusion. Extinction aggression can play a role in the emotions and reactions that arise. But a dog isn’t jealous in the brooding way a human can be, holding onto her jealousy long after the object is out of sight, or trying to punish you emotionally afterward. As soon as the threat of loss or exclusion is clearly over, her feelings of uncertainty will be gone and, with them, her jealousy.

The 100 Silliest Things People Say About Dogs

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"Dogs are a kind of tame wolf". "Dogs are predators and pack animals". "You have to be your dog's leader, or else the dog will dominate you". "Pit bulls are just like any other dog." All these statements are FALSE. In this ground-breaking and sometimes controversial book, Alexandra Semyonova explodes the 100 most common myths about dogs, their nature, their behaviour and how to treat them ... [\[Read more\]](#)