



Pet Behavior Counseling

Helping you and your pet become best friends for life.

LIVING WITH A SENIOR DOG

By Kate Ramsdell

I often say that living with a puppy is a lesson in humility, patience and surrender. What I never realized was just how true this would also be in the golden years. Don't get me wrong. In no way would I trade these times for the world, but as I see my previously strong and vital dog aging, it is impossible not to notice the similarities to his first year. Emotionally, I am still shocked by how suddenly this aging process seems to have occurred, however intellectually I know that it has been going on less dramatically for quite some time. My best advice to frustrated puppy owners is to enjoy their young ones energy level and curiosity, as there will most definitely come a day that they long for that mischievous attitude, and then can't help but smile when a glimmer of it returns.



Dogs grow old in various ways, both physically and mentally. Many begin to lose their sight and hearing, and start to rely more often upon their sense of smell. It never ceases to amaze me how I can be standing five feet away from my old pal calling to him at increasing decibels, and not until my voice has become quite loud does he respond to it with that look of surprise. It saddens me that when I come home he is no longer even aware of my arrival until I seek him out. Amazingly though, despite all this, he can still easily hear the light tinkle of the treat jar opening. (In order to assuage my ego, I simply tell myself that his response is due to the high pitch of the glass and really not selective hearing.)

Like a young pup, constant supervision while outdoors and on walks is always required, as wandering off has become commonplace. I know that there are times when anybody passing by would think it necessary to call a mental health official as they observe me jumping up and down in the field waving my arms back and forth trying to help the old

man locate exactly where I am. As much as I know every time I let him loose in the fields to roam I run the risk of having to act like a fool to regain his attention, it is impossible to deny him what he loves so much.

Oh, and I cannot forget about the addition of nightlights to our home. If anybody had ever told me that I would invest in nightlights for the dog I would have laughed; when it comes to the electric bill I am a miser. But as his vision has deteriorated the old fella can no longer see at night or judge depth, and the only way to safely navigate the stairs is if they are well lit. In the whole scheme of things what is a few more cents on the electric bill?

In the past few weeks a discussion has ensued regarding construction at the house. That is the construction of ramps. Stairs are becoming increasingly difficult even in good light, and while we can do nothing about those inside, the ones leading to the dog yard are workable. What I have found to work well inside the house however is to simply keep a hand lightly on his back when descending or ascending the stairs. For whatever reason, this prevents him from stumbling, and ultimately falling.

I must also mention that all that time spent on teaching him as a young puppy to take food gently and not to bite too hard has gone right down the toilet along with his vision. Even fingers might be treats nowadays and the only way to know for sure is to taste them.

Having to change my walking style has been a feat in itself. Let's face it, with much chagrin I must admit that I am a transplant from New York, and when I walk, I move. Walks have never been meandering strolls to me, they have been a reason to get from point A to point B, or else they served to help me justify the chocolate bar that I had just consumed. My walks today can no longer be like this, the meandering strolling has set in, and you know what? The flowers are beautiful when they are not a blur. One great gift that my old man tries to give to me, and I still struggle to remember to receive, is to help me see the beauty in slowing down and taking it easy.

As for the carpets, well the way to look at those is that they are expendable and can easily be replaced. As a matter of fact by having to buy a new carpet we can help to contribute to the struggling manufacturing segment of our economy. I have been fortunate and the accidents are few, but I highly recommend that as our loved ones age arrangements are made for them to relieve themselves more frequently during the day. Regardless, this is no guarantee, as I distinctly recall a recent episode of barking to come inside and then promptly walking to the middle of the living room for elimination purposes. Ooops! Just another momentary lapse.

I must say that the hardest thing that we have had to go through has not been physical, but rather mental deterioration. As a neighbor said, my pal's name should be changed to Sybil, as we never truly know what personality will come out. There are times when racing down the road and bounding through the fields just bursts out of him like those energy spurts he had in puppyhood. There are other times when even getting him to move forward is a struggle. I felt badly for the poor cat, with whom he has never played, when he decided that it would be amusing to chase her around the house. One of the most startling revelations was when he decided, at fourteen years of age, that for the

first time in his life he liked water and wanted to go for a swim in the pond. As I had never seen him swim in his lifetime, I was simply unwilling to let him try. I myself was not prepared for swimming that day.

While he continues to recognize me, many people that have been friends for years are no longer always recognizable, and the house and its pack members must be protected from the evils of the world, which not only include unknown people and dogs, but also clumps of grass and cement mixers, amongst other things. As I think back, this is exactly what he was like as a young lad, all full of himself and the notion that he could take on the world (and the vets, and the groomers, etc...). So I guess in the end we have sort of come full circle, and I do truly have my puppy again.



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