



Photo: Andy Omvik

BREATHING SPACE

## A new puppy, my anxiety and me

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By learning how to care for her new dog, Cate Sevilla is learning how to care for herself



By Cate Sevilla on 29.11.17

That first night with our new puppy, I lay in bed paralysed by shocking, if not completely ridiculous, levels of anxiety. My pulse raced and my heart felt as though it was beating so loud I was certain it would wake the puppy.

The bedroom was silent, aside from the occasional snore from my husband, and the sounds of puppy dreams from deep within the small dog crate nestled in the corner of our bedroom. But inside my head, I was on the highest of alerts – awaiting the imminent cries and whines that would surely start any moment. Awaiting an accidental wee. Awaiting the moment I'd have to battle my own willpower and not swoop in to comfort the tiny, nine-week-old puppy that I was sure would soon start crying any moment now.

Despite the hours spent keeping myself at a mental version of DEFCON 1, that moment never came. She slept eight hours straight, didn't cry once, didn't have an accident, and the only person who found that first night terrorising and confusing was me – the 32-year-old, anxiety-ridden adult human doing alternate nostril breathing at 3am as a means to finally fall asleep.

From the early morning wake-up calls standing outside in the rain, to balancing a puppy's needs with my work schedule, my self-care had all but gone out the window in a matter of days. I had been emailing with a friend of mine who recently got a puppy, and after agreeing it was indeed tiring, she also mentioned that, in addition to the challenges, she was mostly trying to be patient, present, and enjoy every moment as she knew her puppy would grow up so fast. She even used the phrase "viewing the world through a different set of eyes" which, in any other scenario I would have found irritating, but instead, found completely eye-opening.

Her perspective was a lovely, serene way to view puppyhood. And it filled me with an immediate sense of grief – because this wasn't necessarily my experience. Or, more importantly, it wasn't how I was *letting myself* experience this time with my dog.

In addition to the first night of panic, my feelings were dominated by bouts of high anxiety and stress, that seemed to simply be rooted in the fear that I am going to do the wrong thing, and completely fuck up my dog. *What if she turns out to be that cute-but-irritating dog nobody wants to be around? WHAT IF WE BECOME THOSE PEOPLE?!*

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## Anxiousness and the paralysing fear of doing the wrong thing are nothing new to me, and are feelings I've struggled with most of my life

Anxiousness and the paralysing fear of doing the wrong thing are nothing new to me, and are feelings I've struggled with most of my life. They're familiar topics I discuss with my (wonderful) psychotherapist who I see once a week.

So, naturally, both the excitement and anxiety I'd been experiencing with my new pup were topics I brought into my therapy sessions. I attributed these anxious feelings as just simple extensions of my standard neurosis – like feeling guilty about saying no through fear it will put someone else out. But when I started describing the actual situations with my pup that would cause my anxiety to skyrocket, my therapist's observations were rather revealing:

“So, what you're saying is, is that you're finding it difficult when your dog makes mistakes, or struggles to learn, and that you have extremely high expectations for how the dog should be behaving and performing, regardless of her age?”

I nodded, a bit dumbfounded, but clearly able to see where this was going:

"It sounds to me that this intolerance for imperfection, is really mirroring the intolerance and impatience you have for yourself."

Aaaand there it was.

It's a scientific fact that dogs can not only *sense their owner's emotions*, it actually *affects their own mood and behaviour*. So now, I was actually anxious that my own anxiety and inner turmoil was confusing the heck out of my pup. The realisation that I'm holding her (my tiny, fluffy, lovely, sweet puppy) to the same asinine levels of perfectionism I was holding myself to was all a bit much. And I knew I needed to start making some changes.

There's a famous Elizabeth Stone quote that says having children is like having "your heart go walking around outside your body" – what I didn't expect from getting a dog, is that I would have a furry, 4kg reflection of my own self-care walking around outside of myself.

Never mind teaching her to sit and stay – she's now teaching me about the kindness in having patience, to soften the sharp edges of my intolerance for mistakes, and to accept that, perhaps, having the "perfect" dog is not only subjective, but rather impossible.

As we've all settled and established a routine over the last four weeks, things are genuinely becoming more easy, every single day. I'm trying my best to see that incremental progress does equal evolution over time, and to not let the small mistakes erase overall improvement. (Also, FFS she's been alive for 90 days, perhaps I could cut her some slack?)

My hope is that through my puppy's training and learning process, I'll eventually learn to tame and rehabilitate my own, wild expectations, and see if you can indeed teach an old dog new tricks.

*@CateSevilla*

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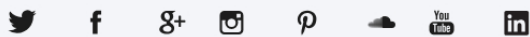
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