



Tackling canine challenges with Covid-19: Face Masks?

Bach Canine Rehab and Canine Rebalance have collaborated on a blog regarding wearing masks for coronavirus, and how this may affect the dogs in our lives

Dogs can be very wary of new experiences, people and equipment, even if they are generally well socialised and not usually of a nervous disposition. This is part of the survival instinct – “if I have not seen this person / item / experienced this before, how do I know it’s safe”? They also use body language as their main form of communication, and as such, pay very close attention to our body language and facial expressions, and that of people they interact with, to a level of subtlety that we mere humans will likely never understand! Does your dog know, when you get ready to leave the house, whether or not they are coming with you, just by what you wear and how you act? Do they know whether they are off on a walk, or being left on their own, long before you pick up a lead or go to the front door? Dogs’ perception levels are hugely more developed than our own (and we class ourselves as the more sophisticated species!), perhaps why they make such good companions and we sometimes feel that they “read our minds”!

So, if we were to alter our appearance, how would our dogs react? Say....if we wore something over our face? Covering a part of your face, so that your dog can no longer read your facial expressions, is something that could be very frightening and disconcerting. With coronavirus sadly changing the way we live, and likely to do so for a number of months to come, it is possible that your dog may have to interact with people wearing facial masks, or you may choose to wear one yourself. If your vet, groomer, canine therapist or dog walker decide to wear a mask, and your dog is not used to seeing this, it could make their interaction with this person very stressful for your dog, and also make it very hard for the person wearing the mask to be able to do their job fully and effectively. Even a well-socialised dog could feel anxious if interacting with someone wearing a mask for the first time.

How do our dogs tell us they are feeling unsure, frightened or anxious of new stimuli? They may:

Tuck their tail, hold their ears back, lip lick, look away, show the white of their eye, lift a paw, tremble or shake, lower their body position, overgroom themselves, sniff the ground or other objects more than usual, seek out comfort from people they know (ie you!), hide, freeze, or in extreme cases, urinate, defecate, snarl, growl, or even bite.

If your dog has a history of showing anxiety/fear or stress to new stimuli or environments, it is possible that they will find people wearing masks initially very difficult to deal with.

So how can you make this a less daunting addition for your dog?

To transition your dog safely, effectively and positively to be comfortable with these new appearances, desensitisation and counter conditioning can be used. These two processes work together to help alleviate your dog’s anxiety and fear to new stimuli.

'Desensitisation is the process of **exposing the animal to a stimulus beginning at a very low intensity**. Counter conditioning and desensitisation need to be used together to be effective and are often used to change unwanted behaviour in dogs and cats, especially fearful and aggressive behaviours.' (www.animalhumanesociety.org)

There is a plethora of information on desensitisation and counter conditioning on the internet. For some of you this may not be a new concept, you may already have plenty of knowledge and skills to prepare your dog for these altered appearances. But for some of you, you may find the following links useful in helping to prepare your dog.

<https://www.companionanimalpsychology.com/2018/07/what-is-desensitization-and-counter.html>

<https://www.cooldogtuts.com/2018/02/systematic-desensitization-and-counter-conditioning.html>

<https://pets.webmd.com/desensitization-and-counterconditioning>

Canine Rebalance and Bach Canine Rehab will be following the guidance from the Government, but we do hope to be able to open our businesses in the not too distant future! However, in these uncertain times we may well be asked or advised to wear a face mask to help stop the spread of Coronavirus. You may also be advised to do the same.

As canine therapists committed to the physical and emotional wellbeing of your dogs, we believe in providing a safe and secure environment for your dog to be treated in. We also believe in providing an environment whereby your dog is able to relax and respond positively to all therapy. The addition of us wearing a face mask during treatments may possibly cause your dog anxiety if they haven't been fully prepared. As a result, we do hope you find this post thought provoking and perhaps enable you to prepare your dog. We are here to support you and your dog in any way we can, if wearing face masks becomes necessary.

Stay safe and well and we look forward to seeing you all again soon.