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By **DIANNA YOUNG** Special to the NEWS



The relationship between dog and humans would not have worked if dogs could not have successfully adapted to the subliminal signals humans send out.

If you haven't spent much time around dogs, you might think they are crude little critters that don't focus on much besides dinner, fire hydrants and their next ride in the family car.

You would be wrong.

Actually, dogs are amazingly attuned to subtle — as well as not-so-subtle — changes in our state of mind and to fluctuations in the group dynamics that surround them. After all, dogs have lived successfully with people for hundreds of thousands of years. The relationship would not have worked if they could not detect, correctly read and successfully adapt to the subliminal signals we send out all the time.

Many of us have had first- or second-hand experience with the phenomenon. For example, have you ever heard someone try to explain why she feels such closeness to her dog?

"He knows how I feel," that person might say. "He knows when I'm happy, he knows when I'm sad."

And that person would be dead on.

This amazing canine ability can work in ways that might surprise us, however. Let me tell you the story of a dog I'll call Joe, and his owner, whom I'll call Ann. She had been bringing Joe to us for several years for extended visits, and we knew him well. Joe was a medium sized dog of a breed renowned for its intelligence, and he lived up to the breed's reputation. On top of that, he was a super-nice dog. Every year, his human family went overseas to visit relatives for several weeks, and Joe came to stay with us. We

looked forward to his visits.

A couple of summers ago, Ann brought Joe for his extended visit and asked me to keep an especially watchful eye on him. He really hadn't been himself for about the past six months, she said. He had been uncharacteristically aggressive with other dogs, had destroyed some things in the house, and even once or twice had aggressed people. She asked me to tell her if I saw the same kinds of behaviors. She worried that if Joe didn't mend his ways, she might eventually have no choice but to euthanize him.

We had Joe for about six weeks, and during that time we saw all the things Ann had described to us. He was full of anxiety, stress and frustration. Sometimes he tried to pick fights with other dogs.

At the end of her vacation, Ann came back and asked if we had seen any of the behaviors she had described. We told her we had seen them all. The look that flooded her face revealed her terrible disappointment. She had hoped we would see no behavioral problems; instead, we had confirmed them. She feared what that might mean for Joe's future.

So I decided to delve a little deeper into what Joe was undergoing.

"What's been going on at home, Ann?" I asked.

Well, over the course of the last year, her husband had unexpectedly lost his mother. Then, her husband unexpectedly lost his father. Then, in his early 50s, he switched careers. They sold a house, and bought a house, and moved his family into the new home. Then, their teen-age daughter went out of control.

Wow!

"Anything else, Ann?" I asked.

My point was that every one of those things was traumatic and life-changing. Taken together, they must have been almost overwhelming. It was easy to see how Ann and her husband — the pack leaders — could temporarily become weak entities, carrying the burdens and stresses they had been carrying. Their dog had been accustomed to nice, strong structure and leadership in their house. Joe had had a happy life in that house.

But when pack leadership essentially disappears, for whatever reason, a dog has no choice but to step up to the plate. That is what Joe was attempting to do. It was not a role he was innately equipped for, and he was making a lot of poor decisions.

Fortunately, this story has a happy ending. During the time he was with us, Joe was away from his environment of angst and stress. He got to run, to play and to be a dog. He began to decompress. At the end of six weeks, his family returned and they, too, had experienced a similar decompression. They had gotten to spend some quality and healing time with each other and with their extended family overseas, away from the pressures of work and of every-day life. By the time they got back, they were well on their way to recovery, as individuals and as a family, including their daughter. So was Joe. They went home together, and the entire family continued to heal.

We've had Joe with us again the last two summers since that incident. As a matter of fact, he left us just a few days ago. And I'm happy to tell you the change in him has been substantial. He is the same great dog he had been before.

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