

# INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW

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## ***Does Your Dog Suffer From Contact Phobia?***

Contact Phobia is found in all breeds of dogs and at all levels of agility training and competition. The symptoms range from a dog slowly creeping down a dog walk or a-frame to a dog spontaneously running undirected (often referred to as "zoomies") around the standard agility ring. Numerous dogs in the sport of agility suffer from "Contact Phobia" and often they are misdiagnosed by their handlers who think they have an attention or confidence problem.

Not all "zoomies" are the result of contact stress but when they only occur in the standard ring, the handler should take notice.

In a weekend of agility I see dogs cautiously trot around a course and enthusiastically visit bar setters. Then there are others that suddenly find a superb spot on the ground to sniff. These behaviors demonstrate avoidance and sometimes reveal a worried, stressed, nervous dog who would rather be somewhere else. Don't let wagging tails fool you. Stressed dogs wag their tails too!

Most dogs subscribe to the adage: "When in doubt....SNIFF!" This "look busy" sniffing problem is not a lack of attention. The fact of the matter is that the dog is paying very close attention and knows full well that a contact performance is looming. Since this sniffing is not really an attention issue, training for concentration and handler focus does not improve the situation.

Some dogs "stress up" resulting in "zoomies" and others "stress down" which presents as slow, hesitant performance and/or distraction.

When a dog's anxiety level is very high, they will even look to leave the ring or refuse to set up at the start line. I have witnessed all of these behaviors at one time or another watching from outside the agility ring.

In order to fix "contact phobia," first you must understand what causes it.

I know of no trainer who severely corrects a dog for missing a contact (especially in a ring!) Then why are some dogs so upset about contact performance?

Most dogs are uncomfortable when they make mistakes; especially if there is a penalty for the error and they do not understand what they did wrong. This scenario leads to all kinds of avoidance behavior.

The biggest dilemma when training contacts is confusion. The dog simply does not clearly understand what his job is and the handler is not consistent with criteria requirements and release procedures.

Dogs are very situational. This means that they learn things in the context in which they are taught.

For example, if you teach a dog a stopped contact (commonly with two feet on the board and two feet on the ground) the dog must learn how to arrive at this position with his handler in front of him, behind him, on his right and on his left. He must understand how to perform a 2on2off when his handler is close to the obstacle and if the handler is twenty feet away from the obstacle. To the dog, these different situations are all unique and require additional learning.

If a dog performs correctly in training but then forgets to execute his contact behavior in the ring, the consistent handler will stop, indicate the error and unemotionally leave the ring. For some dogs this means ending the run by having to leave the ring.

If the handler chooses to ignore the mistake because the dog is qualifying, then the dog enters a zone of uncertainty. He wonders why the rules change in the ring. Sometimes he must stop on the contact and at other times he is permitted to keep running.

Dogs can find this conflicting information very stressful.

For a dog to completely understand a contact behavior, he must be clear about how he is released off the contact. If, in practice, the handler always releases the dog with a "break" command, then the same must happen even in midst of competitive excitement. It only takes a couple of mistakes on the part of the handler forgetting to release the dog, to cause major confusion.

Many trainers use targets (lids with food on them) to teach a dog to run down into or through a contact. While it is easy to establish the correct behavior as the dog runs down a plank to eat a treat, I do not see all dogs easily transferring this concept when the target is removed. It's as if the dog is unsure of his performance when the target is no longer visible at the end of the contact.

Trainers talk about "fading a target." This involves making a lid less visible by using a clear plastic and/or making it smaller until it disappears. Not all dogs respond well to "fading a target" and for some, when the aid is gone, so is the behavior. These dogs are perplexed when their handler indicates an error in performance and they do not see a target.

There will never be food or a lid in an agility ring. The dog must eventually learn the true behavior without aids. Dogs become trapped in confusion as their trainers go back to putting targets and treats into training when ring performance deteriorates.

With targets present, the dog returns to running fast and confident but the obstacle execution in the ring still suffers. Over time stress builds because the dog trains with one site picture and trials in another.

Sensitive dogs that worry when they make a mistake should be trained honestly. This means using as few artificial props as possible. Handlers need to be extra careful to maintain contact criteria in and out of the ring. Take the time to explain to your dog under what conditions he must perform to limit confusion.

There are many different ways to teach contacts in agility. If you are not happy with the results you are getting, find a better way. Be on the look out for "Contact Phobia" and treat it before it escalates.