

How I Psychologically Damaged My Dog Using Punishment

My German shepherd, Ike, was 125 lbs and he was pulling me everywhere. My back was wrenched from getting pulled down the sidewalk so I called a trainer. She recommended that I use a prong collar and deliver corrections each time Ike pulled on leash. A correction is a sudden jerk on the leash that will cinch the collar on a dog's neck, delivering pain. I wasn't happy about hurting my dog, but she assured me that the pain was minimal, his behavior would quickly change and the pulling would stop.

Jerking on that leash didn't sit right with me. I'd come home from walks with an elevated heart rate and sit on the couch feeling horrible. I eventually stopped giving corrections but continued to use the prong collar because although he still pulled it wasn't as bad and gave me some relief.

Within a few weeks of the corrections, one day Ike slipped past me at the front door, ran to the sidewalk and attacked a puppy walking by with his owner. I raced out and was able to quickly separate him and apologize. This was the first of three similar instances. I was dumbfounded as to why my dog was suddenly so aggressive towards other dogs.

Fast forward 5 years: I've left my corporate job and I'm studying to become a dog trainer. This is where I learned from many different books about the unwanted side effects of punishment. You see, dogs have what's called superstitious learning and they can learn to blame pain they feel on whatever they were looking at when the pain was experienced. On walks, Ike would get excited and start pulling when he'd see another dog walking on the other side of the street and I would deliver a correction. He had learned to associate the site of other dogs with pain in his neck. **I did that.**

In the 50s [B.F. Skinner confirmed that punishment training works, but changed his position over time, noting that the behavioral change was short lived and the animal only learned to avoid the punishment instead of learning to avoid the behavior causing the punishment.](#) I'm not ready to say that punishment training has no place in dog training, I just haven't found a situation where positive reinforcement doesn't work. So the question becomes, are you willing to spend some extra time to teach your dog using positive reinforcement? Maybe it will take longer, but you'll never harm your dog or create a contentious relationship with him. Who wants that?

I would never use punishment on my dog again and I certainly wouldn't recommend that to a client. Eleven years later I still have a hard time thinking about what I did. Even writing about it now is difficult for me. The first and best course of action I should have taken was to **hire a certified dog trainer**. I didn't know at the time, but unlike many other fields, dog training requires no education or certification. Anyone can call themselves a dog trainer. So even if you don't use me to help you train your dog, I highly recommend that you find a certified trainer. The Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers requires all certified trainers complete 300 hours of training, pass a 200 question exam and commit to their position on punishment, called LIMA. Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive means we should try all other options before punishment, including bringing in another trainer. You can find certified trainers on their website - www.ccpdt.org.