

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Hi there, I have a question for you. Do you know how your dog or puppy self-regulates? If you aren't a hundred percent sure, you're probably in the majority. But after today's podcast, you will not only know the answer to that question, but you'll know why it's so very important and why the opposite of it, your dog's dysregulation, may be the root of a lot of problems that can be solved around your home.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And if you're watching this on YouTube, go ahead and hit that like button if this is a topic you have some interest in. First, let me define self-regulation. Funny enough, it's very similar in humans as it is in dogs. It's pretty much the same in all animals.

It's the animal's ability to show control or to be able to manage their [responses, reactions, emotions, energy states](#), and bodily functions, quite honestly. It's the dog's ability to choose the desired response over the undesired response. And I say it like that because if I said it was the dog's ability to choose right from wrong, there's an implication there that the dog knows what's right or [what's wrong](#).

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What we want is for them to choose what we desire, and by keeping that in mind, it's not going to be right or wrong. The dog's never going to be right or wrong. The dog just has the ability to choose what you desire, which is a human thing, which they have to learn when they live in our world. And it's up to us to educate them.

So, self-regulation is the dog's ability to make those decisions. Think of a child patiently waiting their turn while other children go ahead of them, or a child not throwing a tantrum in a checkout line when their mom says no to getting a candy bar. Or any child's ability to deal with disappointment without having a complete meltdown, but rather having a positive outlook on that situation and that frustration or that disappointment.

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Let's face it, that's difficult for an adult to do, let alone a child. But self-regulation is a part of that for a child. But a child that has great self-regulation is going to show that.

Now the opposite of self-regulation is dysregulation, and that's the obvious. Have you ever, for example, had a moment in time where you had to swear at the computer screen, or maybe you were trying to fix something or learn something and you were frustrated and some choice words came out of your mouth then, or a heavy sigh or clenching of your fist or gritting of your teeth?

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What about in heavy traffic when you see somebody weaving in and out of traffic, almost getting in an accident? Any choice words at that moment? That is you showing some dysregulation. Now the amount and the frequency of it is super important because chronic dysregulation can actually lead to some serious health problems.

I mean, long-term anxiety for sure. But every time any of us has one of those blowups or meltdowns, we have a flood of cortisol going through our body.



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And having that chronically will lead to health problems such as heart dysfunction, sleep disruption, of course chronic and escalating anxiety, basically the loss of your joy. Personally, I try to catch myself whenever I'm in a moment of swearing in frustration.

Not that I ever swear of course, I try to catch myself and change the frustration to just a moment to pause. Deep breath, release, what can I do, moving forward. It's a work in progress, let me tell you, and I'm sure anybody that works around me can possibly share a story or two about that one.

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But what we want is self-regulation. We want it for our dogs. We want it for ourselves. Because self-regulation promotes resiliency in the face of distress or frustration. It promotes problem solving and the ability to focus and work through failure or little bumps in the road without going off on an emotional tangent.

Desired choices are more consistently made. And with dogs, when people say, "Well, whew! I think he's outgrown his puppy stage," what they're really saying is, "My puppy has finally learned to self-regulate." And I've got a newsflash for you, sometimes it doesn't happen on its own. I give you Exhibit A: Tater Salad, [who came into this home](#) because he showed very-little-to-no-self-regulation and a few couches were destroyed in the process.

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But just think of a puppy coming into a new home. They don't have the ability to control their bladder, their bowels, or their behavior, but it's expected. Yes, we give them some grace about maybe not peeing or pooping on the floor for a week or two, but behavior, it's like instantaneously people have this high expectation that they should know right from wrong.

They're babies. Bladder, bowels, behavior, guess which one of those three is the last for the puppy to learn how to self-regulate. Behavior, especially emotions. There are signs that your puppy or dog may be showing you that could be signs of dysregulation. Now they could be other things but generally speaking they could be dysregulation.

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If your puppy is like hyperactive, they're always moving. They get what we call the zoomies. They have difficulty settling. They have difficulty focusing. They destroy things AKA the former Tater Salad, previously known as Samson in this home, not destroying anything. They might bark, vocalize a lot, maybe a lot of whining.

They may have heightened anxiety, heightened fear response, maybe more aggression. And something as simple as what I saw in This!, very irregular sleep patterns. All of those are some of the ways you might be seeing dysregulation in your dog or puppy.

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Now on top of that, there's multipliers, things that will actually increase the dysregulation that puppy or dog will show. And it starts with genetics. Some dogs are just what we call wired a little tighter in that they are higher drive or maybe more laid back. But they could be bad genetics where the dog just is a more anxious dog. It could be the way that puppy was raised, that the [proper puppy raising protocols](#) [say that three times real fast] weren't observed. And so, the puppy missed out on some critical elements when they were growing up from birth to when you got the puppy in your home.



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Things like the socialization history. What was that puppy exposed to? What kind of extremes? What kind of stressors, both in the environment and in the people they saw, in the other dogs or puppies that they were around? Health challenges could exasperate dysregulation. Things like [poor digestion that I saw with my dog This!](#)

Pain, an older dog in pain, or a younger dog in pain, could be a multiplier to the dysregulation that you're seeing in your dog. A dog that's super tired, overtired, or too hungry. Hello, *hangry*. Have you ever felt hangry? It's your emotional reflection of your lack of food in your tummy. Yes, that is emotional dysregulation, my friend.

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A dog that's forced to make a difficult decision. They may show some dysregulation in that they have no way to get out of a situation. They may snap, or growl, or lunge, or lose control of their bowels. The human dynamics in your house will definitely have an impact on your puppy's or dog's dysregulation.

Things like how yourself or your family members are regulated. How much yelling goes on in response to things that don't go your way? Hello, it's time to maybe take a look at that. How do you deal with frustration? What about the bickering in your house? All of that is impacting the dogs, or any of the pets in your home, and definitely will be a multiplier for the dysregulation that you're seeing.

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Things like trigger stacking, which I spoke about in [podcast episode number 112](#), where the dog has had so many triggers in that day that the dysregulation is just going to explode at some point. A change in routine is going to have a massive impact on a dog. So, something like maybe you have company coming over.

I know Belief, our 14-month-old puppy, she loses it when new people come in the house. People she knows comes in the house. Even the UPS guy comes to the door, so she gets so excited. It's like extreme dysregulation. We've got a strategy. It's getting much, much better. But she used to not only lose control of her bladder, she would lose control of her vocals, and her body would just quiver with anticipation to meet somebody.

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So, changes to your routine that maybe you were working at home and now you're working back in the office, that can lead to more dysregulation in your dog's behavior. The environment has this massive impact. So, family members, maybe somebody that your pet was close to went off to college or moved out of the house for another reason.

Or maybe you have a pet sitter coming into the house. It may be no reflection on the pet sitter, it's just different things have changed. For some dogs as simple as rearranging the furniture can have a massive impact on their ability to self-regulate.

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The weather outside. Hello, how many times does your puppy poop in the house when it's raining outside? You could say, "Oh, it's just because my dog doesn't like wet feet." What does that mean? 'Wet feet are causing this. I can't regulate the feeling of the wet feet on my body.'

We need to normalize things that the puppy thinks is weird. Normalizing is their ability to self-regulate wet grass. Some puppies do it much better than others. That's okay.



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Just knowing if you're getting poop in the house or your puppy is doing any one of those other things that show signs of dysregulation, like destroying all your pillows. It's not because he's being spiteful. "[He's showing me he's not happy that I left.](#)" "He did this on purpose." No, he's showing you the inability for him to self-regulate in the environment that you left him in.

Now, here's the good news. Puppies and dogs actually learn to self-regulate on their own. Simple ways. Three basic ways.

Number one is they sleep. They sleep when they need to sleep. Number two, they eat when they need to eat. And number three, they go to the bathroom when they need to go to the bathroom. And they learn to do that in appropriate areas on their own, with or without you.

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Now, hopefully it's not in your house, because if it is, you might want to unlearn that in them. That's just part of how they are self-regulating right now. Another great strategy that a lot of dogs have for dealing with their own stress is they just leave. Not like leave your home, but they'll leave a room.

So, at night Thissie will go onto my bed and just stretch out, flat out. After a long walk she'll do the same thing. She does it far, far less than when her digestion was not well. But before when she was unwell, you could often find her by herself, away from the animals, away from the family stretched out on my bed.

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When your dog isn't equipped to deal with the stress that they're feeling, they will go to plan B, what's called self-soothing behaviors or coping strategies.

Now, many of the Border Collies that I have owned have chosen to suckle on things, suckle on their bed, or suckle on their toy, where they'll suck, and they knead like a little kitten.

Now is it something that I've just not been able to meet their needs? It's just something that they've done since birth, and they keep doing it. It doesn't mean that life is horrible in my home.

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For example, Momentum does it first thing in the morning. She greets me and then she grabs a bed and starts suckling on it. She's happy to see me first thing in the morning. She'll also do it when we have company over, when she sees people come into the house that she knows and loves, she greets them and then runs over and grabs her bed and starts suckling on it.

So, the stress can be good stress when they are going to a self-soothing behavior. But just know self-soothing behaviors can turn into OCD behaviors, which can be a problem.

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So, here's some other examples of self-soothing behavior. I have a friend who has Huskies and at 4:00PM the Huskies howl, self-soothing behaviors. Whatever's going on, maybe it's a certain hour before a mealtime. Maybe it's just a certain time of the day. Maybe it's before or after a walk. It's always approximately the same time. It's part of their self-soothing routine.

Dogs who do excessive grooming, excessive licking of themselves, where they'll lick their paws or their legs or their flank, they'll nibble on their legs. If you have a Doberman, you might see that they'll just suck at their back flank. Maybe get them suckling a toy would be a better idea.



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Some dogs self-soothe, Tater Salad by shredding furniture, whatever is handy. Engaging with other dogs is another strategy that some dogs do to try and get maybe a game of 'bitey mouth' going or a game of chase or some just all out wrestling. Digging is another one.

Belief loves to release energy by digging. We have a special hole that she can dig only this hole, not making holes all over the backyard. Nesting. Dogs who like to dig up the bedding, like you know, circle and find a nesting that can be a self-soothing behavior. Scenting. Just a dog putting their nose down and giving everything a good old sniff could be a self-soothing behavior.

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Now, there are loads others, some of them healthy, some of them not healthy. Some of them your dog might do. Leave me a note in the comments if you're watching this on YouTube, what your dog's self-soothing behavior is. And just know that self-soothing behaviors are coping mechanisms.

They aren't something that's horrible. It doesn't mean that you are a bad pet owner. It's just a way your dog is emotionally regulating. And if it's a good thing that they're selecting, then well done. That's awesome.

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Okay. When a human baby comes home, they do not have the ability to self-regulate, and so they do things like pee and poop and scream. Their digestion doesn't even work. So, what happens is parents do co-regulation as a way of helping that baby grow onto self-regulation.

So, things like the obvious, putting a diaper on the baby, let's not do that to the dogs. But burping a baby after or rocking them to get them to fall asleep or rubbing their back to help with the digestion. Those are things that human parents do to co-regulate behavior.

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Now, there are strategies that I've used on my own dogs. For example, Tater Salad, had what I found a very annoying habit of self-regulation, it could have something to do with his digestion, I don't know for sure, but after he ate every meal, he would go through the house licking fabric, licking beds, licking anything that was fabric. It drove me crazy.

And so, I try to first of all give him an alternate behavior to do, here chew on a bone. It never stopped. And so, I took that need for dysregulation after he ate and what we do now is we feed Tater in a lick mat. All his food gets spread out in a lick mat. And we leave that lick mat down for two or three hours after every meal.

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And anytime he goes back and revisits that lick mat, we just drop a couple cookies in there. And so, he actually will finish his meal, go to lie down, get up, lick the mat some more, and he will lick that mat for a very long time. And guess what, no longer licks any fabric. Yay! So, co-regulation can help until you've given a dog an alley, an access to self-regulate on their own.

And so, if you're interested in some more of the strategies that I've used over the years to help all of my puppies go from co-regulation to self-regulation, jump over to YouTube or to shapedbydog.com and leave a comment on this episode, let me know number one if you're interested on this topic and you'd like to learn more about how to help a puppy or dog go from dysregulation to co-regulation to self-regulation.





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The problem is a lot of you keep locked-in in co-regulation and you end up with dogs that have some behavioral problems because you've never moved beyond that to self-regulation.

So, if this topic is one of interest to you, jump over to YouTube or the shapedbydog.com website, leave me a comment saying, "Yes, I'd like to learn more." And tell me what your dog's current dysregulation that you're seeing is, has it got to be a problem or is it just a way of life?

Let me know and I'll make it a topic of a future episode. I'll see you right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[YouTube Playlist: The Emotional State of Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 64: Help! How Can I Tell My Dog He's Wrong?](#)

[Podcast Episode 78: How to Train a Rescue Dog with Behavior Problems](#)

[Podcast Episode 48: Potty Train Your Puppy in a Week \(Easy 3 Step Process\)](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Puppy Essentials with Susan Garrett Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 204: Dog Behavior And Diet: Recovery For This! Beyond Dog Training Part 2](#)

[Podcast Episode 112: Stressed Dog? How Trigger Stacking Might Be Putting Your Dog Over Threshold](#)

[Podcast Episode 200: Solve Your Dog's Separation Anxiety With FRIDA: Expanding Calm With Functional Relaxation](#)



About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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