

My Foolproof Strategy To Overcoming Dog Training Challenges

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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Today I'm going to talk about something that's relatable to every single dog owner on this planet. And that is challenges with your dog. Yes, everybody, every dog trainer out there, every professional, every pet owner has challenges. Yes, even Susan Garrett has challenges. The difference is my approach to the challenges, and that's what I'm going to share with you today.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. I'd like you to think about dog training challenges that you have currently with any of your dogs right now, could it be not coming when they're called, especially like when you're at the park or away from home, or maybe it's chasing cars, chasing bicycles, or it could be [stealing food](#) from the garbage or the counter.

Or maybe it's just getting [over the top](#), over aroused, or maybe you have a sport dog, and you have a dog that just doesn't listen in the ring. They don't do what you expect of them in the ring. So, you think of your own unique challenge, and there are currently five dogs in this household, and I can name a challenge with any one of them.

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Now I've talked about dog training challenges in other podcast episodes, [episode number 104](#), I talked about a protocol that helps you approach your training challenges. That's not what this is about.

This is about how to make sure you fix your dog training challenges, how my approach to dog training problems is different than most people that I've met.

You see, there's a human element to all of the challenges because we have an expectation of how our dog should behave in any environment. And when your dog misbehaves aka doesn't meet that expectation, now maybe the first time you might go, "Hmm, well that's new." Or you might get a little bit irritated.

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When it happens the second time that's when you go, "Okay, I think we have a problem." Or you might like really get, "What's going on here, buddy?" Because when it repeats, now you have a trend. So, you're going to do what most people do, and that is you're going to [avoid the trigger](#) that created the problem and hope it goes away with time.

Now, you might take a different approach. You're going to avoid the trigger that created the problem, and you might sporadically throw in some dog training at that problem to make sure that the dog you know, doesn't respond in the same way the next time. Or you might be one of those people who avoids the trigger to that problem and really diligently works on dog training to fix the problem.

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And it could be a month that goes by, it could be six months that go by, and suddenly you find yourself in that same environment with that same trigger, and your dog responds exactly in the same way that you didn't want him to after all that training or after all that time.



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And you get frustrated, you get possibly angry, you maybe get embarrassed depending on what it is and where you are, maybe a little bit ashamed. And so, what happens if you have listened to this podcast, you've heard me [talk about the belief loop](#). You had a belief that the problem had gone, that either the dog had outgrown it or that you had fixed it in your training. And so, when the dog shows that behavior again, then your thought is, "Oh, you know better."

And what that does is it does create a triggered emotional response in you that could be one of embarrassment, shame, frustration, or all out anger. And then what that does is you have a reaction, you spring into action, and you might yell at the dog. You might punish the dog physically. You might punish them by [giving them a timeout](#).

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You let them know, "I am very disappointed in your behavior." One way or another. Now what that does, it leads to an outcome which is *he can't be trusted*. "I've tried training this dog" or "I gave him time to outgrow this and he's just not that dog. He's just going to be one of those dogs. He's going to live a limited life. He's not going to be allowed off leash. He can't go to family picnics. He can't go to family dinners because he's *that* dog."

And that's the human element that gets so many people trapped. Now you've heard me quote my friend Dr. Ellyn Bader when she says, "When you feel furious, time to get curious." I love that one.

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I've heard another one that's similar. I don't remember it. Like 'when you're unhappy, maybe go for a nappy.' I don't know. 'When you're angry, have a piece of chocolate cake.' I don't know. Chocolate chip cookies let's go!

The point is, if you believe like me that our dogs are doing the best they can, with the education we've given them in the environment that we've put them in, then all of this has got to come back on you.

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And when it does, it could feel like a very heavy burden, but it doesn't have to be because when it comes back on you, you can go, "Wow, I maybe haven't been doing the right things." Or, "Wow, maybe I have been avoiding it."

And that's what most people do. They manage and they avoid, and they hope that there is a better approach to whatever it is that is that dog training challenge of yours.

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First of all, you've got to decide, is this a problem you see every week if you gave the dog the opportunity, maybe it would happen every day. Or is it something that just every once in a while, like every six months or a year.

If it really is not very frequent, then chances are your regular relationship building, your regular [connecting with your dog](#) will help overcome that problem.

But most challenges don't happen that infrequently because if it's a challenge to you, likely the reciprocal part of that challenge is there's reinforcement for the dog. And what gets reinforced gets repeated. And so, what I suggest is you go through this checklist whenever you are thinking about what is that challenge.



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Number one, does it matter? For example, Tater Salad came to us with this crazy habit of loving to jump into peoples' cars, preferably the front seat, but it could be the passenger seat. If a car door is open, he will like, hightail it across the driveway and jump in the car. If the car door is not open, but the trunk is open, he'll jump in the trunk.

If the trunk is not open and the doors aren't open, but the windows are open, that Bulldog will jump through the window, and he won't do anything. He just sits in the car. So, it's a bit of an embarrassment at times, but not really because it's Tater Salad and I actually don't care.

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So, I've never put any effort into trying to fix it. It is uniquely him. And we just manage it by, when somebody comes to deliver something, we say, "You better close that car door when you're on your way up to the front porch." It's kind of comical, so we don't do anything about it.

Unlike, he also came with a habit of wanting to run away. Preferably to the golf course across the road. Why? Because these little things called golf carts drove up and down the fairway, and so that we did have to fix.

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And so that was a concentrated training project. That was something that we cared about. So, question number one, does it matter? And you might even ask, is this affecting my dog's quality of life or is this affecting my dog's health and welfare? So, if it affects the dog's health and welfare, then you should make it a priority.

If it's affecting the dog's quality of life, then I think maybe it's not like number one, but is number one point B. The dog really should have the best life possible, and we can give that to them by putting some effort in. So, ask yourself that question, does it matter? Are you just going to let it happen or are you going to make it a priority to fix it?

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Question number two, I'd like you to evaluate the management and the crutches that you've been applying to this behavior up to now and be honest. So, management would be you always keep the dog on leash, the dog doesn't get freedom to rehearse the challenge.

And quite often this is what people do. They manage, manage, manage, manage, and then blindly trust because enough time has gone by that the memory of the bad behavior, what they call bad behavior is kind of fading. And so, you blindly trust, and you take off the leash and whoops, there he goes again over to the golf course.

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And so, that approach can't happen. You've got to be conscientious of the management tools that you have been using and the crutches, I'll get to those later. And there needs to be a strategic approach to losing those management tools. It can't just be, "Well, I put in the training, let's see how it goes." That is not a strategy, that is a fool's bet really, when it's your dog's best life that is dependent upon the best outcome here.

So, you need to evaluate when and where, and how often you've been managing the behavior. Now, the management may also be verbal crutches from you. Things like, ["ah-ah"](#), ["leave it"](#), or ["hey, hey, hey!"](#), or saying the dog's name "Ta-teeerr!"



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That's warning him of a threat that don't leave 'or else.' Those crutches make the dog possibly behave when they're within an arm's reach of you, but possibly they are not when they are 100 feet or 50 feet or even 20 feet away from you. What we want is a dog who voluntarily wants to make the choice you want them to make because you've made the circumstances so reinforcing for him that he wants to make the right choice. Alright.

So, evaluate the management and the crutches that you've been applying to life with that dog. And I'm not saying don't use them, I'm saying make a list of what they are and then let's [look at a plan](#) to get rid of them strategically, not just 'let's see how it goes.'

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Okay, number three, let's do a deep dive into your journal. What's that you say? You haven't been writing notes and journaling about this issue? Okay my friend, no time like the present, because what we need to know is where the improvement's happening.

There's an old saying, 'what you track improves,' and so we need to track behavior. You need to track anything that required management or a crutch. Now, you're not going to put your dog in a situation where you know, he might run out and get into traffic because you didn't want to use one of your crutches. By all means keep your dog safe, but you're going to track that.

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You're going to say, 'dog made great choice here,' write down all those good choices that you see the dog making and 'dog didn't make such a good choice here.' And I want you to write what your emotions were when that happened. What were you thinking? What were you feeling? What were your thoughts? [What were your emotions?](#) What were your actions? And what did that leave you with a new belief about your dog?

Because we need to evaluate this and all of that can go [in a journal](#). Of course, we want to journal the good things that you did, that 'I played these games that led to these great choices in my dog.' So, we want to keep playing games and you could write those in a training log.

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But the journal is really about, we're focusing in on this one thing we want to fix. And why I like that is because we can flip back the pages. We are going to measure where you were last week. And all of the things that you've done in between where you are this week. We're always heading towards getting rid of the management tools and of course, not using any crutches.

You see, without the journal, what happens is we just tend to avoid those triggers that we know that our dog's going to make poor choices around. But that avoidance leads to the belief that the triggers are gone.

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And that's unfair to the dog because it creates this expectation in our head, and then what we decide is a poor choice. Then what may have been a, "Oh wow, you know, I can't believe he did that" turns into, "What did you do?!" right?

We get triggered in a bigger way if we aren't present to what we are thinking and feeling. And if we aren't present to what is the strategy we've taken, to overcome those triggers. And that's why journaling is just so important.



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We need to know the direction we're heading. We need to know how far we've come. Journaling is just critical. The last thing I would like you to put on the journal every day is 'what did you learn from what happened?' Remember, if you feel furious, time to get curious. And I think that is such a big part of being okay with wherever you are.

You know what, if there's frustration, anger, embarrassment, shame, you package that all up and you set an imaginary flame to it and you just set it on its way. Get it out of there. You have no need to carry around that emotional baggage. All that does is drive a wedge between you and your dog. So, when you see something that is out of character or is something that you don't want to see, evaluate your response.

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For example, last weekend, I felt frustrated. Very, very frustrated. I was running my eight-and-a-half-year-old dog Momentum at an agility trial and she could not listen to my cues any run there was a seesaw involved. Now, she came first or second in most of the other classes where there was no seesaw, but she's obsessed with a seesaw.

Back in 2019, the last time we were at the World Championships, I said to myself, "Wow, this seesaw obsession's getting a little out of hand. I may have to do some counterconditioning with it." But guess what I did, I did nothing because something called Covid hit and I just hoped it would be okay.

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Now guess what happened? It doesn't get okay. It gets worse and worse and worse. Now she's an eight-year-old dog and I'm like, maybe we can get through her career without me having to do this extra work. Well, this year has proven to me I'm going to have to do the work. So, guess what I did, when I felt that frustration, I said, "My dog doesn't deserve that." That was Sunday afternoon.

Monday morning, I was out there training. And guess what I did, I did a simple little sequence, and then I had Kim bang the seesaw off to the side and tried the sequence again, and she couldn't do it. Da-da, I've got a starting point. I'm so happy. Now I can work on incremental changes until I can have her at least lower that arousal state.

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You need to have a plan. You've got to journal your challenges, journal your successes, but most importantly, journal your emotions because I need you to get curious. Curiosity just takes away any burden from you. Curiosity makes sure your relationship is always number one. So, no matter what happens with your dog, it's always 'where are we now and how can we get better.'

So, number one, you asked yourself, does it matter. Number two, you have to evaluate the management and crutches you've been doing. Number three, you're going to look at your journaling, brush off that journal, started up again.

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Number four, I really want you to write down your emotions. I want you to feel gratitude for whatever challenges that your dog has brought to you.

Because that's going to allow you to open up a new life for your dog, a better life for the two of you. More connection, more opportunities to go new places.



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If you have an agility dog as I saw on the weekend, a lot of people when a dog [would knock a bar](#) or miss a contact or leave a start line, they'd get in a huff and they'd pick them up and they'd storm out of the ring.

That emotion, I promise you, is not making for a better relationship with your dog and what it is doing, back to that belief loop, it is planting seeds in your brain about who your dog is in agility.

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It's taking away the responsibility from you to fix it. It's all about that dog. You know, here's another thing that happened to me on the weekend.

Somebody came up to me who's been around the sport. I mean, he used to compete years ago, and he came up to me and said, "Hey, I noticed that one dog of yours is pretty slow. I guess that's okay cause you're older now and it makes it easier for you to handle, right?"

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And now keep in mind that This! went clean seven of nine runs, and she came first, second, or third in six of those seven runs. And so yes, she doesn't have ballistic Border Collie frantic energy.

And so, I was trying to be polite and said, "You know, my old girl Feature, she didn't look like one of those ballistic dogs, but she was quite fast, and I believe This! and I will be there, too."

And he said, "Well, she's just not like that driven anywhere." And I said, "Here's the thing about being 62, what you think of my dog is not nearly as important to me as what I think of my dog."

"What you think of what we look like out there in agility isn't as important to me as what my dog feels when she's out there doing agility with me."

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And so, you know, I tried to be polite and then maybe I wasn't polite. But the point is, whatever anybody thinks, if somebody comes up to you and says, "That dog was knocking bars, he's got to learn better. That dog just doesn't care. That dog's blowing you off." You have got to be able to smile, nod, and go back to what's important.

Only thing that's important is what you think of your dog and what your emotions are telling you. And I've got to tell you, life is better when you see nothing but amazing things in your dog. And you know your job is to just uncover them.

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The fifth thing I have for you is go back to [podcast episode number 24](#), where I talked about the distraction intensity index.

That is going to give you another great plan on how to work through these distractions that you may be handcuffed by right now.

And if you are still challenged and still don't know and you want help from us, I'd like you to write into our team at wag@dogs.com.

Because if you are frustrated and you don't know where to go and you want to be part of one of our programs where we can give you strategic game plans to take you to a better place, I want you to get there.



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Just write to the team and say, 'I need another plan.' That's the subject line. 'I need another plan.' Okay, I know I covered a lot. Most important, what do you think about your dog? "Oh, Susan. Yeah, I know I love my dog, but sometimes he frustrates me."

What can you change about the lens you're looking through your dog right now, so his behavior doesn't frustrate you?

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It's just information. It's just feedback. It's just a compass to tell you where your training needs to go next. I hope this makes sense to you. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Contact Us:

Write to us at wag@dogsthat.com for another dog training plan.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 33: How Do I Stop My Dog Counter Surfing?!](#)

[Podcast Episode 215: What Your Destructive, Lunging, Nipping Or Hyper Dog Or Puppy Is Trying To Teach You](#)

[Podcast Episode 104: Naughty Dog Behaviors And How To Deal With Them](#)

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

[Podcast Episode 224: Unleashing Fluency In Dog Training: Cracking The Canine Communication Code](#)

[Podcast Episode 34: Time Outs for Dogs: Does Your Dog Need One?](#)

[Podcast Episode 186: 2 Types Of Connection With Dogs: Dog Agility And Daily Life Case Studies](#)

[Podcast Episode 194: The Invisible Reason Your Dog Is Ignoring You](#)

[Podcast Episode 131: How Would Susan Garrett Plan Your Dog Training Sessions?](#)

[Podcast Episode 150: Adding Mindset To Your Dog Training Tools: Who Do You Become?](#)

[Podcast Episode 71: Pro Dog Trainer's Secret to Help Your Naughty Dog](#)

[Blog Post: The Top 10 Reasons Agility Dogs Drop Bars](#)

[Podcast Episode 24: Help for Dogs who Chase Chipmunks, Bicycles, and Neighbor's Cats \(Distraction Intensity Index\)](#)



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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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