

20

potential problems with punishment

An e-book

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20 potential problems with punishment

Why it should be a last resort

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Effect on unwanted behaviour

1

Often unnecessary

Behaviour may shift with reinforcement alone – often no need to punish

2

Only works sometimes

If reinforcer maintaining the unwanted behaviour is strong enough, behaviour may not change

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Needs to be severe

Animals habituate to low-level aversives – these don't work or stop working over time

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May reinforce unwanted behaviour

Punishing escape behaviours tends to reinforce them; some intended punishers may be reinforcing (attention...)

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Effect on animal



20 problems with punishment in animal training

Punishment could ruin our relationships with animals, cause anxiety, aggressive behaviour, or apathy – and it easily transforms into abuse.



Recently there was a video post in my Facebook feed that caught my attention.

Typically, on Facebook, I'm a bit of a lurker. I'm not very active, and when I do watch videos I often don't share, like or comment – even when perhaps I should.

This time, I watched, feeling my jaw gradually dropping in disbelief, and then I actually left a comment.

I wrote:

"I'm speechless".

I know, that was lame.

But I didn't have time for an essay, and then I was flooded by the rest of the FB flow, so the film slipped to the back of my mind – where it's been festering.

A few weeks ago, I wrote that I was speechless. But in the time that's gone by, I've realized that I should do the opposite.

I should speak up.

I figure, if people don't realize that using punishment in animal training might be problematic, they need to be informed.

I am by no means the first to voice my concerns, but this obviously needs repeating.

[The video](#) I watched proposed an automatic correction feature of an "on-collar training and tracking device" for dogs. Apparently, it's a thing that you attach to a collar that can track your dog's activity and also deliver electrical stimulation (a euphemism for shocks), noise or vibrations. I will refer to these corrections as zapping below, fully realizing that the lowest settings may be very mild indeed.

What was suggested in the film was that when the dog does anything that we don't like, such as barking or trespassing in forbidden areas, it can be zapped, automatically, without us even being present. And so the dog will stop barking or trespassing.

I've seen this referred to as the *New Standard of Dog Training*.

For me, it's *Completely Outdated and Potentially Harmful*.

The thing is, punishment works – unwanted behaviour is eliminated. At least sometimes. So people keep using punishment.

But, here's the thing.

There is a price to be paid for using punishment. It may be a very small price, almost imperceptible. Or it may be very large.

It is the *potential for serious fallout* that worries me.

Using punishment in animal training is the equivalent to taking medication that only works sometimes and has humungous, not to mention common, side effects.

Frankly, I wouldn't risk it *unless there's no other option*.

At the very least, people should be aware that there *are* potentially serious side effects, rather than stumbling blindly into a punishment scenario.

Also, people should be aware of the alternatives, so that they can make an informed choice.

And yes, in a way I'm living under a rock. I'm not a dog owner, and such gadgets are not allowed in Sweden. I realize that in many other places they're the norm, and nobody raises an eyebrow, let alone drops a jaw.

Perspective shift

Let's take the animal's perspective for a minute.

Imagine you're a dog.

Come on now. I know you want to.

Medium-sized, brown, long hair. Goofy ears. I'm unfamiliar with the different breeds, but the dog that's in my mind's eye looks sort of like Lady in that old Disney film. You know the one.

Imagine Lady's standing on the doorstep to the kitchen, and there's a chicken on the counter, as depicted in the video that caused the jaw-dropping.

The smell is delicious. And it's within reach, too.

OK Karolina, but why are we doing this?

Bear with me. We're imagining that we're Lady so that we can get an understanding of her:

- Conflicting motivations
- Learning experience when zapped



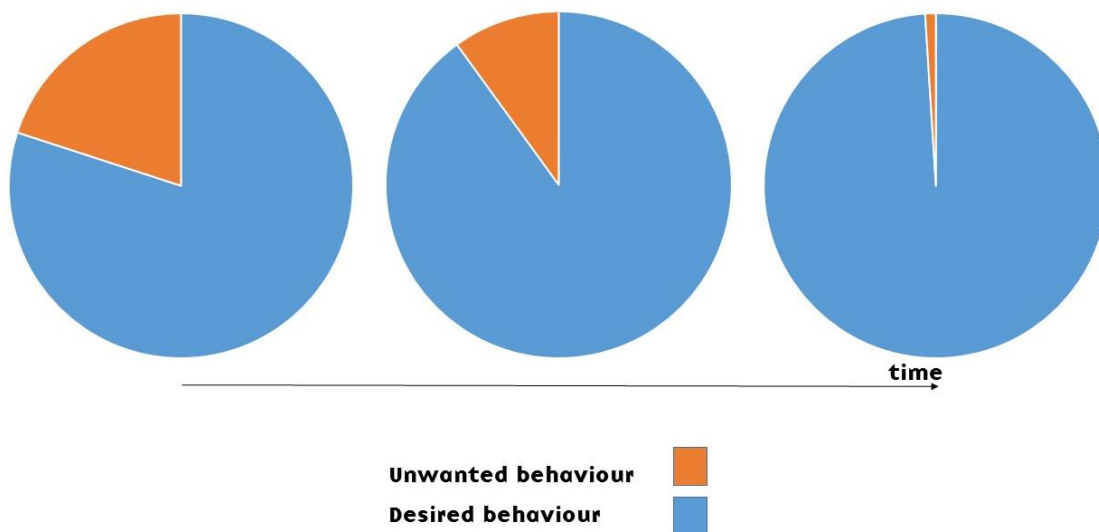
Setting the animal up to fail: a chicken on the counter.

Effect on unwanted behaviour.

Punishment is often unnecessary

There's this misconception amongst some trainers that to get desired behaviour, we use reinforcement, and to get rid of undesired behaviour, we need to use punishment.

That's a misunderstanding.



During reinforcement, one behaviour is increased – at the expense of some other behaviour.

The animal can only perform so many behaviours, as there are but 60 seconds to a minute. If one behaviour increases, then by default, *something else needs to decrease* – whether that's resting, running, doing unwanted behaviour – or something else.

In fact, this phenomenon is often where the solution to unwanted behaviour lies – as discussed in the last section of this e-book. *Punishment is often unnecessary* – reinforce something else and the unwanted behaviour might diminish, especially if what you reinforce is incompatible with the unwanted behaviour. The choice of which behaviour to reinforce is important, since some behaviours are likely to be affected by certain others - and others aren't.

Punishment only works sometimes

Animals don't perform behaviour out of the blue. If Lady is barking, she's got a reason to do it. And if you're leaving a chicken on the counter, you're asking for trouble.

Animals behave for effect. For instance, Lady may bark so that the scary person goes away. Or Lady may steal the chicken because it smelled darn good and tasted even better.



An easy choice: stealing the chicken.

The thing is, reinforcers *maintain* behaviour. Having found a chicken on one lucky occasion, she will likely *steal the next chicken too* if there's an opportunity. Lady will start counter surfing, looking for tidbits. The counter has become *interesting*.

Which means that when you're introducing punishment into the equation, it's *competing with the available reinforcers* – whatever they might be. In turn, this means that unless the punishment is annoying enough, the delicious chicken may trump being zapped.

Lo and behold. Lady may choose to steal *despite* being zapped.

What does this mean?

It means that *sometimes, punishment doesn't work*.



*Punishment scenario 1) Reinforcement trumps punishment:
Lady steals chicken despite being zapped.*

What have we accomplished here? We've caused Lady discomfort, yet taught nothing that's useful to us. She's stolen the chicken and gotten a bit used to aversive things happening.

Regardless of the intentions, that actually qualifies as *abuse* in my book – as [I discuss in this blog post](#). I'm defining abuse as anything that causes suffering to the animal and has no benefits to the trainer. The abuse may be mild or severe depending on how unpleasant the zapping is.

At that point, many people increase the level of zapping.

At some intensity level, the zapping will likely be annoying or painful enough to actually discourage going for the chicken.



*Punishment scenario 2:
Zapping is intense enough to trump chicken.*

Do you see why this is a problem?

In order for punishment to work it needs to be severe enough.

In order to work, punishment needs to be severe

How much is “severe enough”?

Level 3 on some scale? Or level 7 perhaps? Level 42?

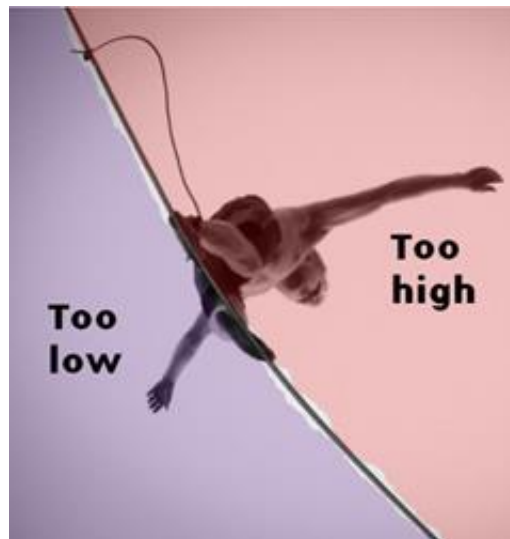
How do we know?

One major problem of punishment is that *we can never know how much is enough to trump the available reinforcers, and how much is too much.*

Using punishment is like walking a tightrope. Staying balanced on the rope is the equivalent of effective punishment that diminishes the target behaviour.

But there are two ways of doing it wrong, and the path is very narrow.

- Too low intensity – and we’re being abusive: causing suffering without the animal changing her behaviour.
- Too high intensity – and we’re also causing Lady needless suffering – she would have changed her behaviour at a lower level of intensity.



Using punishment is like walking a tightrope – whichever side you fall off, the animal suffers as the level of intensity of the aversive is either too high or too low.

To make it even more difficult, this balance of available reinforcers and intensity of punishers will look different for each scenario. Chicken might be very popular and warrant a huge zap, whereas yesterday’s cheese sandwich only requires a small one. A hungry Lady may make another decision than a full one. She may make another decision in the kitchen than in the living room. Or depending on whether anyone’s present or not.

When the cat’s away the mice will play. Which takes us back to “punishment only works sometimes”.

Intended punishment may be a positive reinforcer

Say that Lady vocalizes out of fear and gets zapped. Zapping increases fear, so fear-related behaviours increase.

Hence, Lady vocalizes more, rather than less.

Another example: Lady vocalizes, and gets scolded. This negative attention is intended as punishment, but attention happens to be reinforcing to Lady, so vocalizations increase.

Often we don't realize what's reinforcing to animals – or children for that matter.

I see this so often in misbehaving children. They'll do anything to get their parent's attention – even when it's getting yelled at. “no, stop that, don't do that, I told you a thousand times...!!!”.

Which brings us to the third example.

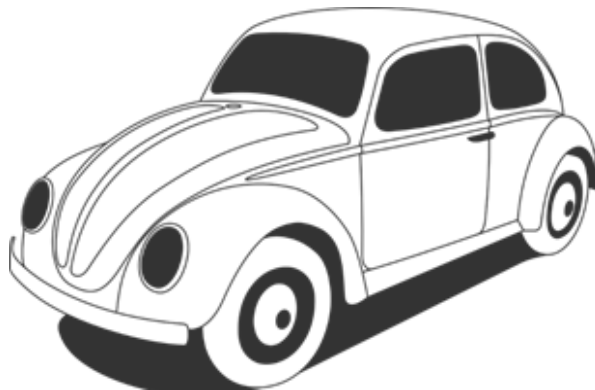
Don't think of a yellow car.

No, I said don't!!!

You didn't think of a yellow car, now did you? I told you not to!!!

OK. You'll get one more chance. Don't think of a red car.

What!!! Again!!!! I thought I made myself very clear...?



Which colour is the car?

This phenomenon is called [the ironic process theory](#) and it suggests that when we focus our attention on unwanted behaviour, we tend to perform them. A practical example might be “I'm not going to do any shopping today” – and then you end up buying a lot of stuff you don't need. This example may not be so useful when discussing animal training, but certainly when raising kids.

“Stop hitting your brother!!!” could be rephrased as “try talking to him instead” to avoid the risk of accidentally reinforcing the unwanted behaviour.

Abuse often becomes part of punishment regimes.

Back to counter surfing and dogs.

Set the zapping level once and be done?

Mostly, not.

Often, we can't calibrate the intensity of the aversive stimulus for a particular context once and be done. There's a phenomenon referred to as "Punishment callous" – Lady may build resistance to the punishers; she may habituate, or desensitize, to aversives. After a while they might not work any longer, so the trainer increases the level of zapping. And then the higher level stops working too. So we're back at abuse, only we're now causing much more discomfort or pain than originally.

Punishment easily becomes a vicious circle, ranging from too much, becoming effective, then abusive, as the frustrated trainer tries to find the zap level that "works" – and all the while the intensity of the zapping is increased.

Zapping over time



Abuse often unintentionally becomes an integral part of punishment regimes – and zapping increases.

I realize that not all punishment scenarios look like this, but it's plausible that some do. And since I'm discussing techniques that could potentially harm animals, we need to discuss the worst case scenarios rather than effective punishment with a minimum exposure to aversives.

My concern is the potential for harm these techniques and gadgets could cause in the hands of inexperienced trainers and pet owners.

Sounds like "the New Standard of Dog Training"?

Leaving a chicken on the counter. Slipping into the vicious circle of increased zapping.

To me, that is setting Lady up to fail, and then abusing her for doing so.

Punishment can be delivered without risking falling into the vicious circle of abuse. But I'm not going to discuss how it's done in this e-book.

Why? Because I sort of get queasy just thinking about it, I would only use it as a last resort, and I don't think anyone should use punishment without being aware of all the possible ways that things could go wrong.

Also, the person delivering punishment would very likely fall off the other side of the tightrope.

Let's move on to how being exposed to punishment could potentially impact Lady.

Effects of punishment on the animal

Being exposed to punishment is like walking a mine field

Back to being Lady.

Imagine scampering into the kitchen, following a delicious scent. And suddenly, out of the blue – zap!

You startle and take a step back. Move sideways. Zap!

Step to the left. Zap!

Step to the right. Oh, that was safe. One more step. One more. Zap!

Zap!

Zap!

Zap!

See what I'm getting at?

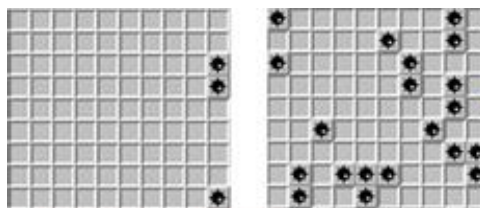
When punishment is introduced, Lady has no clue what's going on. For her, it's like moving across a mine field. Sometimes you get zapped, other times not.

This raises some interesting questions.

What is the density of "mines"? How many ways of doing wrong are there? Are there any safe "areas"? Are there any warning signs?

How will she learn?

The distribution and intensity of the zapping will have profound effects on behaviour, as we'll see below.



Two different punishment scenarios, differing in frequency and distribution.

Punishment doesn't tell the animal what to do. With no further information, all the animal can do is try to avoid the mines.

If the mines seem completely random to Lady, learning will not occur – and she will become stressed.

Punishment is a double whammy

Yesterday, Lady was stealing chickens - counter surfing was being reinforced.

Now she's being zapped instead - and she's no longer getting any reinforcement.

That's not one aversive experience – it's two.

Punishment could lead to superstitious behaviour

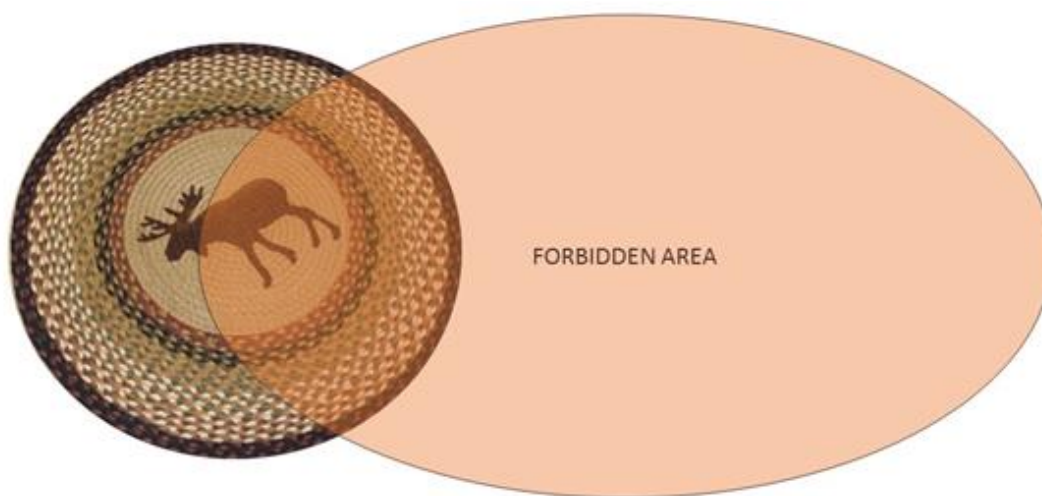
Let's say that Lady was doing several things when the zap occurred.

As in, putting the foot on a kitchen rug at the same time as walking into the forbidden zone in the kitchen.

So, Lady got zapped for trespassing into the zone, but what was most obvious to *her* was the change in texture underfoot. Lady could start to associate zapping with the stepping on the rug. So she might start avoiding the rug – which may have completely different dimensions than the forbidden zone.

She might think she's solved the problem. Avoid the rug – avoid being zapped!

So we've unintentionally punished Lady for something other than the unwanted behaviour. She might not have learned anything about the perimeters of the forbidden zone, but she is now avoiding the rug.



The animal will try to understand what's going on, and may jump to the wrong conclusions.

Punishment could result in apathy and learned helplessness.

Another solution, for many animals, is not doing anything. If moving results in seemingly random zapping, then there's *safety in staying still*.

Animals that are routinely punished will not volunteer many behaviours; they risk becoming apathetic.

Lady might learn that behaviour doesn't work and slip into a serious stress syndrome called [learned helplessness](#), related to clinical depression. Lady may stop even trying to avoid being zapped.

The animal may learn how to stop the punishment, but not how to avoid it.

Consider this:

Everything is fine. Lady is strolling into the kitchen.

Zapping starts. Lady startles, yelps and takes a few steps back.

Zapping stops.



Zapping occurs after behaviour A, but before behaviour B. It's thus both a consequence and an antecedent, but for different behaviours.

Which of these two behaviours is Lady going to learn from?

Will she learn that strolling forward sets off the zapping? Or that stepping back stops it?

Are we punishing strolling forward? Or are we negatively reinforcing stepping back?

Are we providing a consequence? Or are we setting up the environment, making an antecedent arrangement?

It could be the latter. Lady may learn that stepping back stops the aversive. Stepping back is negatively reinforced, and the intended consequence (C) becomes an antecedent (A).

First, she performs an escape response: she hasn't learned the warning signals and gets zapped. After a while, she'll likely learn to associate zapping with other stimuli in the context, and performs an avoidance response – and can thus avoid zapping altogether.

So, Lady may still go for the chicken on the counter in the absence of the warning signals – after all, the main thing she's learned is that when zapping starts, she should step back.

Punishment may cause avoidance behaviour

Through negative reinforcement and classical conditioning, Lady learns to avoid scenarios where zapping occurs.

She may learn to associate anything that was a part of the stimulus picture when zapping occurred to zapping – and start showing avoidance behaviour or becoming very immobile, even in a seemingly different context – as long as the new context shares some defining feature with the punishment scenario.

The smell of chicken.

The rug in the bathroom, if it's in any way similar to the rug in the kitchen.

The time of day.

A specific noise, say the dishwasher.

Wearing a collar.

The presence of the owner.

All of these stimuli might become conditioned punishers through the learned association.

The [poisoned cue](#) scenario is closely related to this: cues (or shall we say commands) taught with the threat of punishment tend to be avoided by the animal.

There's an emotional component to this aversive conditioning also. If growling at a friend is punished, Lady will now like the friend even less.

Speaking of emotions...

Punishment could lead to fear

Pain above a certain level leads to a fearful reaction. This is how [fear conditioning](#) is done in many animal experiments: by using for instance foot shocks.

And since punishment needs to be rather severe to work, fear is very likely a side effect of using these strong aversives.

This could have a few undesirable consequences:

- Fear could transform into defensive aggression, as discussed below.
- Fear could sensitize – so Lady becomes more fearful and responds to low-level-zapping.
- Fear could lead to aversive conditioning and avoidance, as described above.

Many people don't recognize fear in animals – it looks different for different species but a common theme is moving slowly, freezing, or fleeing.

Also, fear may affect learning in undesirable ways.

Punishment could reduce learning

With raised intensities of zapping, at some point people's and animals' ability to think rationally about what is going on will diminish.

Do you know why most doors in public facilities such as theaters, libraries and schools open outwards?

Because in case of an emergency such as a fire, it's too difficult to solve the problem of How to Open a Door by Pulling.

At a certain level of stress, many people can no longer remember that you can open a door by pulling it towards you. They can still push and claw at the handle, but taking a step back and pulling the door towards you becomes very difficult for many people when stressed enough. Also, there may be a panicked mob pressing at the door, so there's simply no room opening it inward.

This phenomenon of reduced performance at high arousal is part of the [Yerkes-Dodson Law](#) and is well documented in people and animals alike.

One concern with zapping dogs is that some individuals could have such a low threshold for when this effect sets in that they simply won't understand what to do to stop being zapped, and maybe can't even remove themselves from the situation.

Punishment could cause neurosis or PTSD

One of the potential problems with the idea of using punishment when the owner isn't even at home is the risk of equipment malfunction.

Zapping occurring in supposedly safe areas. Or no zapping happening in forbidden areas.

Along the same lines of reasoning, sometimes wearing the collar, sometimes not.

Any inconsistencies in punishment criteria is going to confuse the animal. To make matters worse, intermittent punishment can build very persistent unwanted behaviour if it's maintained by a powerful enough reinforcer.

"OK.... So I can be in the kitchen when Mommy's in there and there's no chicken on the counter? But not if she's not there... or wait, what if there's no chicken? Hey – now they moved the rug, does that mean it's safe?"

What happens when the learner has no control over when punishment is given? I mentioned learned helplessness above – another potential outcome is neurotic-like symptoms or PTSD.

Punishment could lead to aggression

I can see three mechanisms by which punishment could lead to aggression:

- Punishment doesn't have to be painful to have that effect – if it signals the unavailability of reinforcers it could be frustrating and lead to aggression (extinction / negative punishment)
- Fear very easily switches into aggression, especially if the animal is in any way cornered and there's nowhere to run.
- The opportunity to attack is a positive reinforcer. As the saying goes, *the best defense is a good offence*, and the animal may attack anything that moves – which makes sense since something nearby is likely to be the source of the aversive stimulus.

Even with an escape available, many animals still switch into aggressive mode when punished.

Lady may lash out at anything and anyone within reach, including children and other dogs.

If aggressive behaviour is punished, warning signals tend to disappear: for instance, if Lady was punished for growling, she may now bite instead.

I'm sure that some breeds are more prone to this type of reaction than others, but still.

Actually, there was [a study](#), covering a large number of different breeds, showing that dogs that were routinely punished showed more problematic behaviour, including aggression, and were less well behaved than dogs trained with positive reinforcement.

Punishment depowers the learner

Choice and control empower animals and promote welfare.

Choice and control is reduced in punishment scenarios, which suggests that punishment techniques are depowering and risk reducing welfare.

Effects of punishment on the punisher

The person doing the punishing thinks it's working, when it's not.

Back to being Lady. Say someone calls your name.

Hey, Lady!

You stop, turn around. What was that?

Ah, nothing. You go back to doing whatever it was you were doing.

You were interrupted, and now you go back to behaving.

This is often what happens when intended punishment occurs, regardless of the level of intensity.

Zapping interrupts ongoing behaviour. For at least a brief moment.

Then, depending on the intensity of punishment, two things may happen:

- Lady goes straight back to doing what she was doing, such as stealing a chicken.
- Lady abandons any chicken-stealing plans

The problem is that many people think that a short pause in the flow of behaviour means that the punishment is working.

It's not.

Effective punishment stops both current and future behaviour. *The behaviour shouldn't happen again.*

If the behaviour happens again, we're not punishing.

We're abusing.

But the damage is done – because the short break in behaviour has *immediate effect on the brain of the person doing the punishing.*

And that tends to stop the search for other solutions.

Fear could be mistaken for learning

This warrants its own section. I already mentioned that fear is a common effect of punishment, and that learning could be negatively affected by fear.

The problem is that people may interpret any change in behaviour as learning.

Thinking that since Lady is no longer trying to get the chicken, *she must have learned* that she's not supposed to steal food.

An alternative explanation may be that Lady has gotten zapped and is now in a fearful state. So rather than learn anything, she just changed emotional states and is now behaving differently.

To the uninitiated person, it looks like she's learned something.

Doling out punishment is reinforcing to the person delivering the punishment

Just like animals, people behave for effect.

People punish for a reason. Lady is doing something that's annoying, and we're trying to make her stop.

And she does. Even if only for a short while.

Sadly, that's enough.

Something annoying stopped when the person delivered the punishment.

That's a set-up for negative reinforcement, folks.

And it doesn't matter that Lady starts doing the annoying thing again 20 seconds later, because the person's brain is now infused with whatever neurotransmitters are involved with this type of learning. Dopamine, perhaps – it's seen in some negative reinforcement learning.

All the side effects come later, too – but the instantaneous effect on the punisher's brain has already predisposed that person to using punishment again. And the "effectiveness" of punishment is typically on a variable ratio schedule so it's very resistant to extinction.

Punishment is glorified in our society. It's also easy, requires no training – and is copied by others.



Punishment could damage the relationship between human and animal.

Relationships are built through repeated interactions.

The interactions could be punitive – aversive to the animal.

Or they could be reinforcing – nice to the animal.

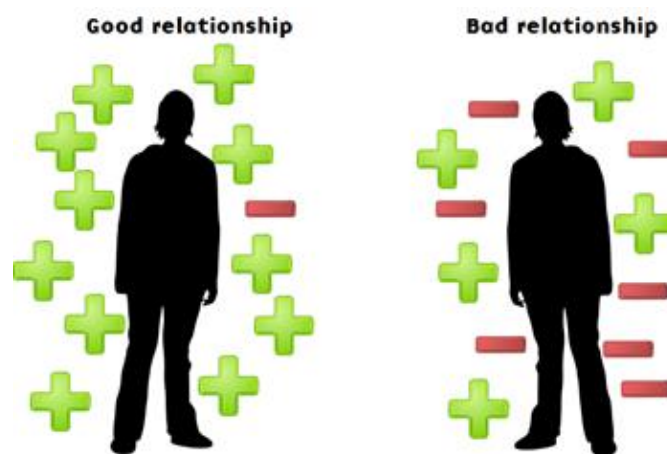
Over time, these interactions build the relationship – and the animal learns what to expect.

How often interesting things happen when the person is around.

How often nasty things happen when the person is around.

How predictably the human behaves.

How trustworthy she is, if you will.



Relationships may be good, bad, or somewhere in between.

Bad relationships don't necessarily imply that the animal avoids the person. For instance, [dogs form attachments to their owners](#), just like children do to their parents. So even with a bad relationship, dogs may seek out their owners.

The quality of the relationship will still influence their welfare, though.

And in the case of Lady stealing chickens at the kitchen counter: if the owner is around when zapping occurs, or if Lady perceives that the punishment is coming from her human, she'll associate that person with being zapped.

And so, the relationship will be tainted. She may even avoid her owner or retaliate.

Or she'll just steal when the owner is not around.

So, what to do?

It's easy to gleefully list all the potential downsides of punishment, but how do you actually solve the stealing problem?

Solving the counter-surfing problem

Setting up for failure – or success?

What are Lady's options?

Currently, the kitchen counter is fun, and the floor is boring.

This set-up is what motivates Lady to explore off-limits.

One hugely effective way of shifting that balance is to make the kitchen counter boring, and the floor fun.

Very likely, Lady will shift her behaviour too – you're setting her up to be successful.

She'll have no reason to go to the forbidden areas, because they would be boring.



Shifting the balance of reinforcement. Don't take this literally.

Shifting the balance of reinforcement requires two (2!) things:

- Thing 1: Remove or reduce the source of reinforcement in the forbidden areas. Don't leave the chicken on the counter. In fact: don't leave even a crumb of anything remotely resembling anything edible or interesting. Forbidden areas should be *boring*.
- Thing 2: Make the allowed areas fun. While Lady probably wouldn't mind, it's actually not advisable to put three chickens on the floor. Rather, toys, puzzles, food mazes and whatnot – whatever she likes to engage in and that will keep her occupied.

Teaching impulse control

Also, you may want to do some impulse control training with Lady, so that she learns that by refraining from taking something she wants, something fabulous will happen.

Here are some key pointers on how I would teach a so-called *leave-it* cue:

- Present inaccessible food (hidden in the hand) – as soon as Lady looks away or turns away from it, she gets a treat
- Gradually shift the criterion so that Lady gives eye contact rather than staring at the food in your hand.
- Don't use any signal to tell Lady when she's doing the wrong thing such as mugging (many other trainers will say "wrong" or "eh-eh" or the like) – let her work it out for herself that mugging gets her nowhere and eye contact gets her something fabulous.
- Change the set-up several times (direction, location, food type etc) so that she can learn to generalize.
- Generalize the concept by putting on a leash and throwing food out of reach on the floor - use a harness rather than collar (reduces strain on Lady's neck if she lunges for the food). When she looks away from the food – give a treat.
- Gradually shift the criterion so that Lady looks at you rather than the food on the floor.
- Once she is reasonably reliably avoiding mugging, introduce the *leave-it* cue.
- Work on duration.
- Gradually make it even more difficult – responding to the cue even when you're not in the room.

Emily Larham (aka kikopup) beautifully illustrates this training sequence [in this video](#), and explains it in more detail.

The New Standard of Animal Training

To me, a punishment-based remote system is not a New Standard of Animal Training. That approach has too many potentially severe side-effects – it would never be my first choice of addressing problem behaviour.

When dealing with counter surfing, I would arrange the environment so that the unwanted behaviour is unlikely to occur, and so that Lady has plenty of other, acceptable, options.

I would set her up for success – rather than failure.

I would teach Lady that it's worthwhile to ignore temptation - reward her for doing something else, such as orienting towards me and giving eye contact, or a relaxed lie-down in a specific location such as on a conveniently placed mat.

Building relationships based on trust and a history of positive reinforcement rather than punishment will result in a more confident, happy Lady.

I know you're burning to ask this question.

But *what if the non-punitive approaches don't work?* Or the scenario is vastly different?

What about life-or-death situations?

Shouldn't you ever, *ever* use punishment?

When to use punishment

Despite the list of downsides, there is a place for punishment.

If Lady was about to get run over by a car, I would do anything to prevent that from happening. That goes without saying. There are dangerous situations where you immediately need to stop behaviour, to save lives or avoid danger.

Also, getting an adrenaline rush is normal in such a situation, which may lead to a harsh tone of voice and forceful behaviour. This might be punishing to the animal, regardless of the intentions.

Still, if that happened, I would consider two things afterwards:

- How badly did I just mess up? Which side effects can I expect to see? Can I reduce the impact?
- I wasn't prepared for this - what can I do to avoid this scenario in the future?

I think many animal owners run into these acute situations at some point where you need to act quickly and resolutely in a way that's aversive to the animal and therefore constitutes a punisher.

Animals recover well from the occasional punisher, that wouldn't worry me too much. After all, that's life. We stub our toe. Miss the bus. Get rained on.

"The occasional defensive punishment is likely to be treated less as a shock than as a signal that a reasonable boundary has been overstepped" Murray Sidman

I can relate to that.

But that's another story. That's the emergency situation.

Remote training with shock collars are not emergency situations.

Even if I had a dog, or shock collars were allowed here, I would be very hesitant to use them. For one, I'd be afraid that I wouldn't do it right. I'd try solving my training problems in other ways; after all, positive reinforcement is forgiving.

Punishment is not – *one mistake might take forever to recover*.

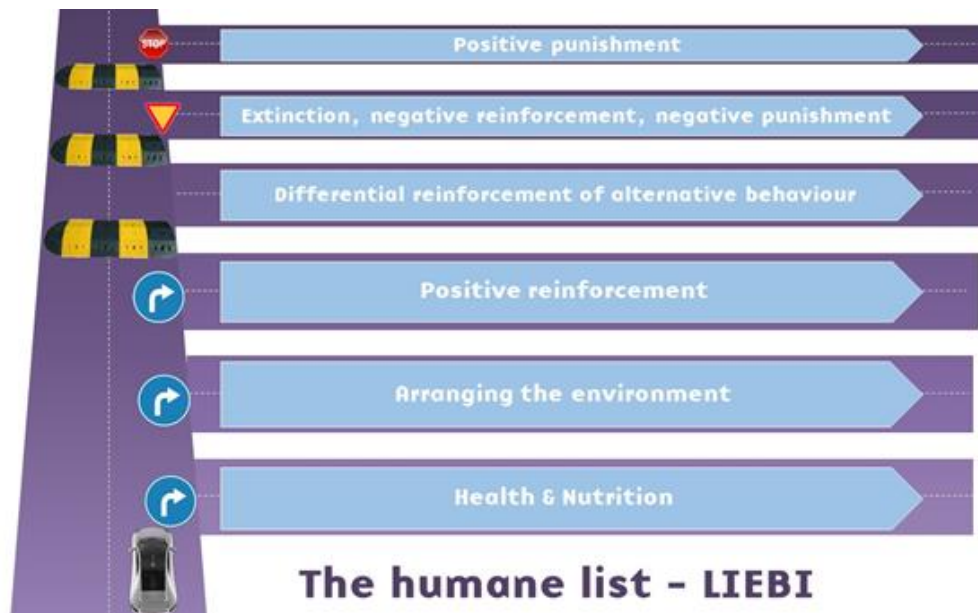
But sometimes you may run into a problem behaviour that can't be solved through any other means, and that can't just be ignored.

In such cases, punishment may be a solution.

For me and many others, punishment is a last resort, to be considered when nothing else works – it's not the first thing to try, or even the fifth.

Actually, following the concept of the Humane Hierarchy (also known as LIMA or LIEBI), it's about the eight or so, depending on whether we're discussing negative punishment (removing something desired) or positive punishment (adding something aversive).

Nerd warning: the following includes terms that I would expect only experienced animal trainers would be familiar with. I mention it because I think beginners need to see this hierarchical thinking even if the details may be a bit complicated.



The humane list or LIEBI / LIMA (brought to the world of animal training by Susan Friedman). Solving behavioural problems is analogous to choosing which exit to take when driving. Try each exit before moving on to the next. The latter choices involve speed bumps, giving way, stopping altogether and consulting the map – meaning thinking it through and consulting others before going down those roads.

- First you check whether any health or nutrition issues may be causing the problem
- Then you see if you can address the problem by making changes to the environment triggering the response (nerd term: antecedent arrangements)
- If that doesn't work, try reinforcing some other behaviour – still doing nothing about the unwanted behaviour
- If that's useless, remove reinforcers for the unwanted behaviour while reinforcing another
- If the problem persists, try extinction, negative punishment or negative reinforcement – these are all potentially aversive to the animal and some of the side effects listed above may result.
- Finally, if all these fail and consulting with others have given no new insights, try positive punishment as a last resort. Try to mitigate the potential side effects – an empowered animal should recover quickly if this is a rare occurrence.

This approach assumes that you've mastered the different techniques on each stage, and that you perform a functional assessment to ensure that you've understood what is maintaining the unwanted behaviour. It's beyond the scope of this blog post to go into details of how to do this, but I will be covering it in one of my upcoming online courses.

When choosing a training approach, remember: Positive reinforcement works, and punishment is dangerous.

It's not to be undertaken lightly.

Actually, I wouldn't use punishment alone, without giving any further information to the animal. I guess that's one reason that I was indeed speechless when first seeing the remote punishment video: it really set the animal up to fail and didn't in any way mitigate the potential adverse effects of punishment.

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