

# Safety First

by TTEAM/TTouch Instructor Edie Jane Eaton



Can you imagine being afraid of the dark? Trying to overcome this fear, you venture out of your house at night, leaving the front door open behind you. Bit by bit, you get further away from the comforting light of the doorway. But then the door closes, and you hear the click of the lock turning!

How brave do you feel now?

This is an example I give to students when they are working with their animals' fears. It is often thought that we can place an animal in a position where it doesn't feel safe, and by feeding it treats, providing comfort, or jollying it along, we can help it discover that life is fine in this scary situation. It may seem to work in the moment, but is it an effective way of helping animals learn how to deal with stressful situations? Wouldn't it be better for them to learn that coping is possible, and they can learn how to do it?

The ability to learn requires certain conditions. Modern studies of stress and its effects support the general ideas of Abraham Maslow, who in 1947 propounded what he called the "Hierarchy of Needs." His theory is that humans have certain basic needs that must be met before we can attend to 'higher' functions such as learning, self-awareness, problem solving, etc. This model seems to hold just as true for non-human animals. The most basic needs are the physiological requirements we need to live - food, sleep, breathing,

etc., and following hard on the heels of these is the need for a sense of safety. However, there are times when the need for safety can outweigh physiological needs, as we see when frightened animals won't eat, so for all practical purposes (and in the context of this article) think: **Safety First!**

Safety may be first - but not alone. What prompted me to write this piece was an article in the New York Times magazine of October 8, 2006, entitled "An Elephant Crack-up" by Charles Siebert. He speaks of how elephants are suffering from stress, and how they are being helped to recover. He writes, and several researchers agree, that ". . . we now understand that elephants hurt like us, [and] we're learning that they can heal like us as well." These are comforting words to those of us who use human experience as our best approximation when we seek to understand reasons for animal behavior - much as I do when speaking of fear of the dark. Of the work of the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee, he says: "Great pains are taken . . . to afford the elephants both a sense of safety and freedom of choice - two mainstays of human trauma therapy . . ."

The sense of safety and freedom of choice are also mainstays of the Tellington Method (TTEAM and TTtouch). They are requirements in the process of helping animals move beyond instinctive and protective responses to learning how to learn - which is one way the work is described by its originator, Linda Tellington Jones.

Many years ago in Germany, I was teaching a TTtouch class in which there was a very shy white German Shepherd, and I demonstrated a technique developed by Kathy Cascade, one of our instructors, which helps dogs with separation issues. This technique requires



the conditions mentioned above - a sense of safety and the freedom of choice. The “rule” is that the dog is always free to return to the safety of her person if she chooses.

I threw some treats on the floor to encourage the dog to move away from her person. The class was sitting in a

circle, and she was being asked to come into the centre, while people made a point of not staring at her. She came about three meters and returned to her place beside her person. The second time she came just one meter before turning back, and the third time I threw treats she got up, but did not come towards me at all and instead went behind her person’s chair, to lie down facing away from me! I knew enough German to know that to many this exercise appeared to be a failure - but I was pleased: she recognized she had a choice and had acted upon it.

The apparent result of this process was amazing! The next morning, we began the class with the same exercise, and this time she immediately came out into the circle, looked around, ate the treats, and went calmly back to her person. From then on, her interaction with others in the class was entirely changed.

A similar situation involved a police horse at a clinic in South Africa. He had a hard time being away from another horse, and it was a constant fight for the rider to get the horse going on its own. I suggested that whenever the horse wanted to go to the other horse he be allowed to do so. According to all the horsemanship I had been taught since childhood this was complete heresy! It triggers age-old arguments about the horse learning he can win, etc., etc. Luckily the rider was willing to give it a try - he had had several unsuccessful battles with the horse in the past and he was open to trying something new. Well, guess what? After a few times of being allowed to go back to his friend, the horse was willing to be on his own.

The importance of safety and freedom of choice was brought home again by a little Morgan mare I met last summer. She had another way of expressing her concern: she grew roots. Her safe choice seemed to be to do nothing. She was small enough to push around, and in order to get things done and move her from one place to another; she had had her fair share of being pushed. So, what did I do but suggest - heresy again! - that she be allowed to stand there for a while before it was again gently suggested to her that she move. It took some time - and several repetitions of the process - before she was able to move on easily, but something must have grown through those roots because during the remaining days of the clinic she moved forward willingly, looked brighter and, as an unexpected bonus, became easier to catch!

These concepts belong also in the Feldenkrais Method, of which I am a practitioner. The Feldenkrais strategy which relates to this idea of “safety first” relates to a quote from Moshe Feldenkrais: “When you know what you do, you can do what you want.” Although the practitioner’s ultimate intention may be for the client to do something in a new and different way, the process might begin by helping the client learn more about what they are doing already, and learn how to do it better and more easily. As a result, the client becomes braver about exploring new and strange (though more useful!) ways that may initially feel wrong, or weird. This strategy is far more successful at effecting useful change than is “making” them do whatever we feel is best for them. Echoes of the German Shepherd, and the horses - no?

So whether safety is found in hiding behind a human, being with a friend, staying where one is, or moving in a familiar way - making safety available as a choice means this: the door stays open between the known and unknown, the house and the dark. We can go back and forth, and eventually venture out with confidence.



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