

## **You're Too Close! Dogs and Body Pressure**

Posted on [July 8, 2014](#) by [eileenanddogs](#)

Too close for comfort?

So you are standing at a party, or in your office, or on your front lawn. Someone you know only vaguely walks up to you. He walks up very close, face to face, close enough that you can see up his nose and smell his breath. He starts a conversation. What do you do?

What you desperately want to do is step back! You may or may not do it, depending on the social situation or a host of other reasons. But when someone we don't know well enters our personal space bubble, it can be very uncomfortable.

Everyone has his or her own bubble. In addition to individual preferences it is also dependent on age, gender, and culture. So I guess it shouldn't surprise us that dogs vary in their sense of personal space as well.

How sensitive is your dog to this kind of pressure? How big is his or her space bubble?

### **What Kind Of Pressure?**

I talk about body pressure a fair amount, so I thought it was time to define and demonstrate it for those who may not be familiar with the concept.

There are different kinds of pressure, of course. Humans have non-concrete types of pressure. Pressure from our jobs, from societal expectations. From owing money.

Dogs seem to experience pressure from expectations as well. We can certainly stress them out easily enough when we train with poor technique, even with positive reinforcement. And of course they respond to physical pressure, touching or pushing, either by yielding to it or with an opposition reflex.

But when I talk about "body pressure," it is pressure from proximity and body language. Not touching, but *the nearness (and body language) of another person or dog.*

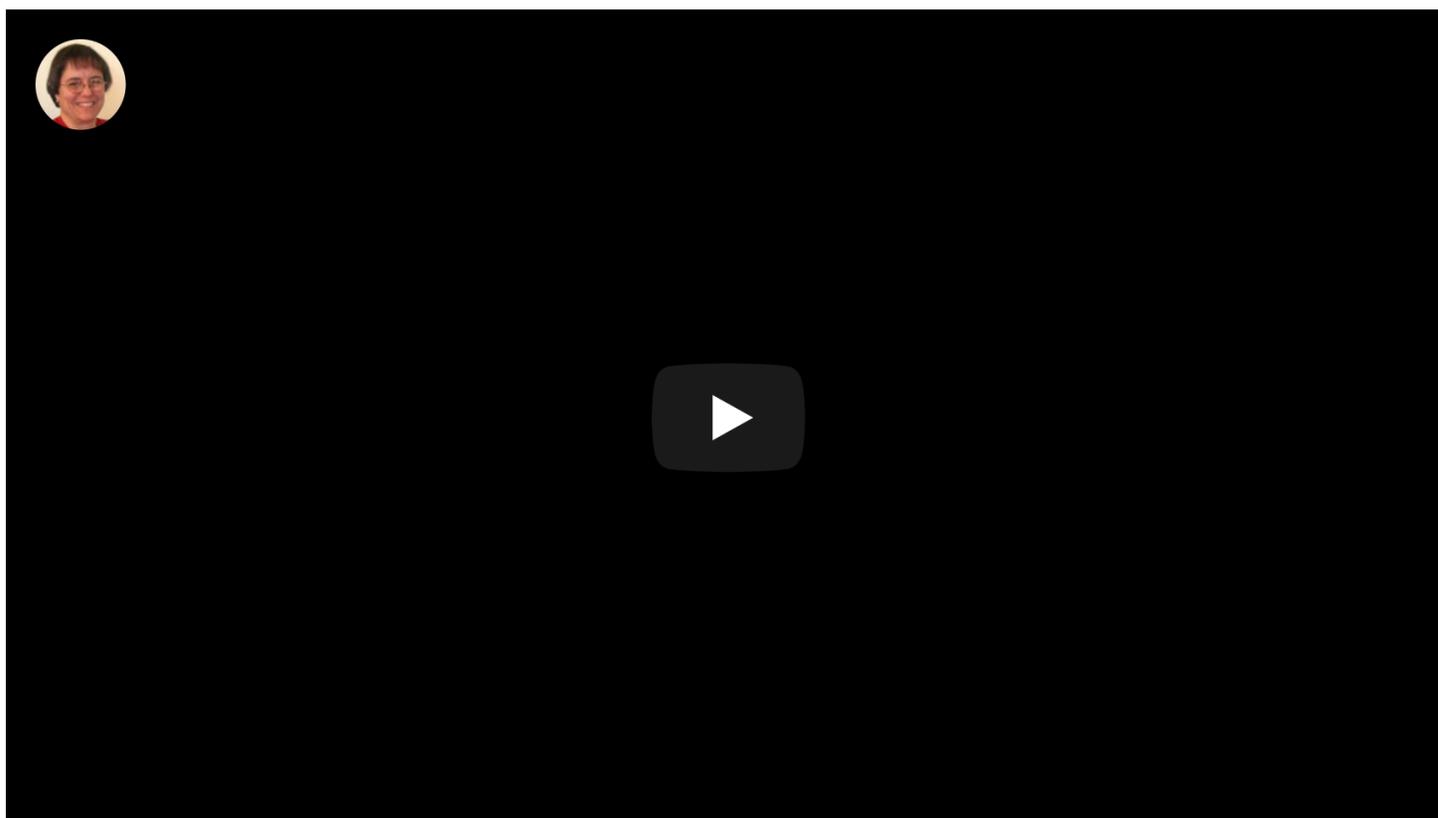
### **Pressure from Humans**

So it's not only what we do (get close) but how we do it. Standing and staring straight at one's dog is very different from brushing by them in the hallway, even though you might be closer in the hallway scenario.

Some of the common ways that dogs feel pressure from us include:

- When we stand facing them straight on
- When we look at them directly
- When we stand tall or lean over them, especially for small dogs
- When we reach out with our hands
- When we walk into their space

I do have a very pressure sensitive dog: little Zani. And I also have a very non-sensitive dog (Clara). In the video I show what their differing responses to proximity to my body look like.



### **Is Sensitivity to Pressure a Problem?**

It can be. Most of us tend to misunderstand or disregard dogs' body language. You can find thousands of videos on YouTube of dogs who are desperately indicating that they would prefer that the humans back off, while the humans actually talk about how happy the dogs are.

Zani is extremely pressure sensitive, as a lot of hounds seem to be. She is what people call a “soft dog.” She bounces back pretty well in most cases, though. Considering the problems of most dogs in this world, be they hungry, neglected, or abused, I would say that Zani has a pretty good life with me. However, from her point of view I am severely lacking. I am an insensitive clod. So I do work on exercises to make her more comfortable.

Actually, Zani really does like being close sometimes

When a dog is uncomfortable with something, there are a couple of ways to address that discomfort. One is by using desensitization and counterconditioning (DS/CC). In this situation, to do that I would pair being close to me with great stuff, non-contingent on what she was doing. We have done some of that with handling, and also with a [fear she had of my elliptical trainer](#).

If a dog is only mildly uncomfortable with something, one can take an approach where the dog is more active. This is sometimes called operant counter-conditioning, or differential reinforcement of an incompatible behavior. The game I show in the video where I am dropping a treat when Zani crosses a line on the floor,

coming close to me, is such an activity. She was comfortable with the distance I set when I was turned to the side. I had envisioned slowly turning towards her, then decreasing the distance between the line and me. But as is clear in the video, Zani told me there was a huge difference in body pressure when I started turning towards her.

I could have adjusted the distance and continued with that plan. But instead I decided to do a combination of DS/CC and some operant games that isolate just one part of the body pressure at a time. I will report back about our progress in the future.

Working on relaxed body handling

Who else has a pressure sensitive dog? Have you worked on it at all?

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### About eileenanddogs

Passionate amateur dog trainer, writer, and learning theory geek. [Eileen Anderson on Google+](#)

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## 28 Responses to *You're Too Close! Dogs and Body Pressure*



**Louisa Golden** says:

July 8, 2014 at 9:42 am

Nice post as always!

I noticed a space bubble consequence this morning while trying to get my dog into the car. Mollie dislikes car rides and is sometimes reluctant to get into the car. I have lots of strategies to make it easier. I sometimes use treats, opposition reflex by cuing a stay and release (into the car), looking at where I want her to go rather than at her directly (so I THOUGHT I was accounting for body pressure, but...), making a nice surface for her to jump on and covering any slippery car parts with a towel.

It all works together to make loading pretty easy but still, there is a moment where she needs to work through her anxiety about the car.

This morning, I did my usual stuff but this time, I held on to the very tip of the leash and stepped as far away as I could from her and stood at an angle from her. And she leapt right in! Almost no hesitation at all. I was surprised at how much difference accommodating that space bubble made in my dog's willingness to try something she finds a bit challenging.

So often your posts strike a timely chord! Thanks again.



**eileenanddogs** says:

July 8, 2014 at 7:43 pm

Thanks, Louisa! You know what's interesting, is that your realization about giving your dog space, along with your mention of the leash, let me to a realization of my own. I took Zani on a road trip once to go to a Nosework seminar. We had never traveled before. She had me worried sick because I couldn't get her to toilet often enough. (I was up at all hours at the hotel and even so she went at least 36 hours without pooping.) Finally I put her on a long line: it worked like a charm. People talk about their dogs wanting "privacy"; maybe it's that sometimes, but you made me put it together that for Zani I think it was just space.

Thanks for your comment. I love that story, and will tuck that concept away for when it next comes in handy.



**Robin J.** says:

July 8, 2014 at 10:01 am

Great article!

We have noticed an interesting change as Tulip ages. For many years, she was a typical touch-sensitive border collie. She enjoyed being near people, but not right next to them. Her preferred distance was about 6 feet, where she would lay and happily survey everything going on. She tolerate being brushed, but didn't enjoy it. And even though she slept on the bed by choice, she slept at the foot end, not touching any other dog or people.

Now, though, she is 14 years old, mostly deaf and mostly blind. And she now chooses to lay within a few inches of a person, I think so she can tell when they start to leave. She even sometimes shares a crate with our other dog, something she never did before.

She is quite cheerful, shows no signs of anxiety, but her desire to always know what's going combined with the significant changes to her sense have led her to decide for herself that closer is now better. Even on the bed at night she now sometimes puts a foot on my foot, a completely new behaviour.

Like Zani, she's only comfortable with this if she's in control, but it's been really interesting to see her change her own definition of personal space!



**eileenanddogs** says:

July 8, 2014 at 7:46 pm

Robin, that is fascinating. I love being able to observe and learn about the choices dogs make when they have the ability to do so. How very practical of Tulip! Thanks for the comment.



**sarahjaneb** says:

July 8, 2014 at 12:18 pm

Yes! My big guy has no bubble. He's always perfectly happy to be right up against me, or even a friendly stranger. But my little one, although she's super snuggly when she's sitting in someone's lap, doesn't like anybody looming over her. If I'm standing when we do our trainings, she'll do like Zani does and stop pretty far away from me. A while back I started doing most of our training with me sitting down, but for some things I'll stand up and just let her stop at a distance.



**eileenanddogs** says:

July 8, 2014 at 9:11 pm

It's fun having one without a bubble, isn't it, except that they tend to knock you over! Good idea about sitting down when you can.



**sarahjaneb** says:

July 8, 2014 at 9:24 pm

Thankfully he's more of a nuzzler than a knocker-over!



**eileenanddogs** says:

July 8, 2014 at 11:36 pm

That's good!



**macgoozle** says:

I was assisting with an incoming welfare check for a dog that was surrendered to our SPCA. Get him on the scale, temp, ears, palpate stomach, de wormer- the normal routine. Well he was afraid of the scale/table. It was new and he was not going to stand on that thing so that we could push the button to move it up. I had the leash and the vet tech turned sideways and boxed him in between us trying to get him to step onto the metal.

Bad move. He went bonkers, and I had to noose him with his leash until she got out of the way so that I could contain him and he would stop lashing out trying to bite. He almost got me that day. I had warned her not to do that but being fearless she pushed anyways. I'm very very conscious of how I look to a dog now because I definitely don't want to make them feel like they have to bite. He was a very very nice dog but that closed in space scared him! Thank you for the advice, this is a great article!



**eileenanddogs** says:

July 8, 2014 at 9:15 pm

Thanks for reminding us that these space issues can be a very big deal! I'm glad you avoided a bite that day. Sounds like you are very conscious of how you are perceived by dogs. Thanks for the comment.



**thegraceofdog** says:

July 8, 2014 at 3:08 pm

Thank you for writing this post, Eileen. I am a dog trainer and TTouch Practitioner who works with many, many shy/cautious/wary/fearful/etc. dogs, almost all of whom are "pressure sensitive." In my experience, not recognizing when dogs need more space is one of the most common oversights humans make in the human-canine relationship. I live with a dog like this, as well—and visitors are always amazed to see that she is really extremely friendly if they simply let HER approach THEM the first time they meet. By the way, I always thank her profusely (and "pay" her well in treats) when she politely tolerates the well-intentioned "clods" among our friends and acquaintances. It is worth every second of (positive) training time we put into helping our dogs be comfortable in all kinds of situations—and it's nice also to give them all the space they want when we can.



**eileenanddogs** says:

July 8, 2014 at 9:22 pm

So nicely put. I, too, try to pay out when I or another clod makes life hard for one of the dogs. They put up with so much from us. Your dog sounds quite a bit like Zani. I don't have videos of it, and I don't talk so much about this side of her, but Zani is extremely gregarious and loves people, especially kids. Such an interesting little bundle she is.... Thanks so much for your comment. You are doing such important work.



**Sarah** says:

July 9, 2014 at 8:31 am

Thank you so much for taking the time to document your insights so that we can all learn more from our dogs. I have a rescue with anxiety and dog reactivity but he isn't your typical 'shy' dog. Despite a lovely trainer, a vet behaviourist and a full bookshelf his sensitivity still gets the best of us. This has been another insightful post and it rings very true for us. I will be watching myself more closely to see how my actions are causing him more stress. Can you recommend any further reading on pressure sensitivity?



**eileenanddogs** says:

Thanks, Sarah! The vet Dr. Sophia Yin talks about space bubbles some in this piece: [Preventing Dog Bites by Learning to Greet Dogs Properly](#) . Another person who advises about body language and personal space is Debbie Jacobs of [Fearfuldogs.com](#). Her book, “A Guide to Living with and Training a Fearful Dog” covers some of this stuff; also she has a FaceBook group that is really great. Probably Turid Rugaas covers it somewhat in her work about dog body language. It seems like lots of people discuss it when talking about fearful and sensitive dogs, but I wrote my pieces because I hadn’t really seen a demo of exactly what we were all talking about. Good luck with your dog!



**Sonya** says:

July 9, 2014 at 11:47 pm

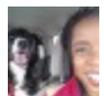
Another blog idea snatched from the archives of my brain and done brilliantly! It’s like our brains are connected. You convey ideas eloquently with words and great instructional videos. Well, I’ll cross that one off the list LOL



**eileenanddogs** says:

July 10, 2014 at 6:32 am

Sonya, I admit I stole via the brain connection, but that doesn’t let you off the hook. You can see from other comments that there is plenty more to be written about this, and videos to be made. Please hop to it! (Hugs)



**kimberlygauthier** says:

July 14, 2014 at 12:11 am

This has given me something to think about. I was walking slowly and deliberately towards one of our puppies and she got her hackles up backed up, barked, then ran away. I called her back and was able to calm her down, but I wonder if that experience is related.

We play like this all the time, but on this day, I was walking right towards her (she was laying down) and I was standing/leaning over her. I can walk up to her slowly or quickly and she happily welcomes me into her space – but not this day. I tried it a few times to make sure that I was reading her right and it happened each time, but with less intensity.



**eileenanddogs** says:

July 14, 2014 at 7:02 am

Interesting! The direct deliberate walk can be a really hard one for some dogs. I wonder if it was just an “off” day for her or there was something different those times?

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**Jenny Haskins** says:

October 21, 2014 at 9:04 pm

My dogs find that the “required distance” for them to sit in front of me for an Obedience Recall, too much altogether.

They are real smoochers so I don't know whether looking up from so close bothers them, or if they think I need a deodorant !



**Jenny Haskins** says:

October 21, 2014 at 9:16 pm

I don't know, but I really suspect that for many dogs, looking up at their handler's face from a close distance is uncomfortable for their neck.

My dogs (German Shepherds) are generally in my space, they like to lean against me. Ironbark especially likes to lean sideways against my knees while I do drumming practise with my hands on his chest. Salle also likes to stand beside me, leaning against my legs, or to sit beside me and hold hands like a shy toddler.

But both dogs hate sitting close in front — if I try to make them come closer, they'll rock back so far they risk falling over backwards!



**Eileen Anderson** says:

October 21, 2014 at 9:58 pm

Interesting! I have heard many experienced people say that just being directly in front like that is the hardest for dogs. But you may have a point about having to crane their necks. I know my dear little Cricket toppled over backwards a few times in her later years trying to look at my face. Thanks for the comments! Good to have another point of view about it.

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