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2021

### Do Anxious Owners Raise More Anxious Dogs?

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#### Recommended Citation

Herzog, H. 2021. Do anxious owners raise more anxious dogs? *Psychology Today* Sept 21  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/animals-and-us/202109/do-anxious-owners-raise-more-anxious-dogs>

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Hal Herzog, Ph.D., Animals and Us

## Do Anxious Owners Raise More Anxious Dogs?

Which comes first, a nervous owner or a nervous dog

Posted September 21, 2021 | Reviewed by Abigail Fagan

### KEY POINTS

- Recent studies have found similarities between the personalities of dog owners and their pets.
- The most consistent finding is that neurotic owners tend to have neurotic dogs.
- The reasons for this relationship are unclear but several studies suggest the causal arrow points from owner to pet.



Source: Photo by Dorazatt/123RF

Kim Brophey, author of *Meet Your Dog: The Game-Changing Guide to Understanding Your Dog's Behavior*, is an applied behavioral ethologist. She specializes in working with dogs who have behavior problems and their owners. When I asked her if dogs who were brought to her canine behavior clinic with anxiety issues tended to have nervous owners, her response was immediate. "Yes, indeed. Dogs belonging to high stress/anxiety clients are often higher than average in their stress levels, and exhibit more anxiety or hyperarousal."

And when I asked Carri Westgarth, author of *The Happy Dog Owner*, whether she had noticed that fearful shy dogs tended to have anxious owners she said, "Absolutely!" These observations are consistent with a growing body of research showing similarities in the personalities of dogs and their owners. The first systematic research on this topic was reported in a [1997 paper](#) by the anthrozoologists Anthony Podberscek and James Serpell. Using the Cattell 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire—a personality test that was popular at the time—they compared the personalities of people who owned aggressive English cocker spaniels with owners of non-aggressive cocker

spaniels. They found the owners of aggressive dogs were more likely to be tense, emotionally less stable, shyer, and more undisciplined than owners of dogs without a history of aggression.

## The Five-Factor Model of Personality

Over the past couple of decades, personality research has been dominated by the Five-Factor Model. This is the theory that individual differences in human personality boil down to five basic dimensions: (1) openness to new experiences, (2) conscientiousness, (3) extroversion, (4) agreeableness, and (5) neuroticism. Some researchers now refer to the neuroticism trait as “negative emotionality” or “emotional instability.” And some investigators prefer to reverse the terminology of the neuroticism scale scores and call the trait “emotional stability.” In this case, more anxious people are said to have low emotional stability.

## Studies Show Nervous Owners Tend to Have Nervous Dogs

Over a dozen studies have now found relationships between at least some Big Five traits in owners and the behavior of their pets. The most consistent findings, however, focus on the factor usually labeled “neuroticism.” People who score high on this factor often experience negative emotions such as fear, guilt, anxiety, and stress. Here is a sample of these findings.

- A research team lead by veterinary behaviorist Nicholas Dodman [examined the relationship between Big Five personality traits](#) of 1,564 dog owners and 17 problematic behaviors in their pets. Owners who scored low on the “emotional stability” trait (had high neuroticism scores) had dogs with problems on 13 of the behavior issues. These included aggression directed toward their owners, aggression toward other dogs, fear, attention-seeking and separation anxiety, and persistent barking.
- [A 2020 study](#) found that people who owned dogs that attacked humans or animals had higher neuroticism scores than owners of nonaggressive dogs.
- [Researchers at the Clever Dog Lab in Vienna and the Family Dog Project in Budapest](#) had owners complete the Big Five Personality Inventory for themselves and a canine version for their dog. On all of the Big Five traits, owners rated their dogs' personalities as similar to themselves, but the owners' and dogs' personality scores were most similar for neuroticism. In the study, the researchers controlled for the possibility that owners might be projecting their insecurities on their pets—they also had family members rate the personalities of the owners and their dogs. Again, owners rated by family members as being high in neuroticism also had dogs that were anxious and fearful.
- Carri Westgarth and her collaborators at the University of Liverpool [examined the incidence of dog bites](#) among adults in 1,280 households. People who scored high on the Big Five neuroticism scale (they used the reverse coded term “emotional stability”) were more likely to have been bitten by a dog than emotionally stable (that is, less neurotic) people.
- In a [2019 study](#), researchers at Michigan State University gave the Big Five personality inventory to 1,681 dog owners. The owners also completed the Dog Personality Questionnaire for their pets. The owners with higher “negative emotionality” scores (their term for neuroticism) had pets that tended to be more fearful, more excitable, less responsive to training.

## Do Owners Make Their Dogs Neurotic? The Causal Arrow Problem

Patricia McConnell, the author of many books on dog behavior and the blog *The Other End of the Leash*, asked me, “So, Hal, which comes first, the nervous dog or the nervous owner?” Good question.

One possibility is the like-owner/like-dog phenomenon is simply a matter of perception—that is, neurotic owners project their anxieties on their perfectly normal pets. The Austrian and Hungarian researchers, however, controlled for this possibility by having outside observers in their study rate the behaviors of the dogs.

It could be that anxious owners are attracted to nervous and emotionally needy dogs and seek them out as pets. After all, social psychologists [have found](#) people choose friends and romantic partners with similar personalities.

Another possibility is that the causal arrow could point up the leash from dogs to their owners. Living with a fearful, aggressive, and emotionally unstable dog might increase their owners' levels of stress and anxiety.

I suspect the most plausible explanation, however, is that neurotic owners—at least partly—help create anxious dogs. Neurotic owners, for example, might be poor dog trainers. Indeed, the canine behavior researcher James Serpell wrote me, “I have previously speculated that neurotic owners might be like overprotective helicopter parents who don’t socialize their dogs properly, thereby making them more anxious in unfamiliar situations.” But then he told me about a [new study](#) from Portugal that suggested a different mechanism might be at play—emotional contagion. Indeed, a slew of studies have found that dogs respond to human emotions. The researchers wrote of their findings, “The results suggest that dogs’ “empathetic trait” (i.e, emotional reactivity to their owners’ emotions)... may explain the observed association between owners’ and dogs’ anxiety.)

Dog behaviorist Kim Brophey believes the emotional contagion hypothesis makes sense, particularly for some breeds. She wrote to me, “Many breeds have been particularly selected for attentiveness to and relationships with humans... They are especially at risk for absorbing the emotional state of their human counterparts.”

I suspect she is right.

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