

Agility

It's Time to Stop

The imposter syndrome

"Does this work for dogs?"

It was a question that changed the direction of my career. I'm a leadership and mindset coach based in Auckland and, for most of my career, my work has been in the corporate world, working with people who want to perform at a higher level. A few years ago, I was in Wellington delivering a workshop on influencing skills when a woman approached me at the end of the day and asked a simple question: "Does this work for dogs?".

I had absolutely no idea what she meant. She explained that she competed in dog Agility and wondered whether the mindset techniques I had been talking about could help her when competing with her dog. That conversation was my introduction to the wonderful world of dog Agility.

Since then, I've had the privilege of coaching many people involved in dog sports, initially Agility and more recently Scent Work, and I've become fascinated by the mental side of competing. I've also discovered just how much people in the dog world care. They care about improving, performing well and, above everything else, their dogs. Yet that emotional connection can sometimes make the mental side of competing more difficult, because the things we care about most also have the greatest capacity to make us nervous, frustrated or doubtful.

One of the most common challenges people mention when they contact me is imposter syndrome. If you are not familiar with the term, it describes the experience of doubting your own ability or achievements. You might look around at a competition and think everyone else seems more experienced or confident than you. Perhaps you've progressed to a higher level but, rather than feeling proud of what you've achieved, you wonder whether you really belong there. You might even worry that eventually you are going to be 'found out'. If you've experienced thoughts like these, remember that the presence of doubt is not proof of a lack of ability. Feeling like an imposter and actually being one are two very different things.

Imposter syndrome can be challenging for anyone, in any situation, but in the Agility world it can be even more complex. Firstly, you are dealing with a lot of uncertainty. Courses are different, the weather changes, events are held in different places and, regardless of how good a trainer you are, there is always an element of unpredictability when competing with your dog.

Secondly, there is a lot of emotion involved. Every single person I've met in the dog world genuinely cares and is passionate about what they do. However, that passion can intensify your feelings, which can make imposter syndrome more challenging. Combine uncertainty with something you care about enormously and you have ideal conditions for self-doubt to appear.

How the mind works

Our minds are constantly trying to predict what is going to happen next, and they don't particularly enjoy uncertainty. When we don't know what will happen, especially when the outcome matters to us, our attention can become drawn towards what might go wrong. There is an old survival logic behind this. Imagine an animal in the wild hearing a sudden rustling in the bushes. If it assumes the noise might be a predator and runs away, only to discover there was no danger, very little has been lost. If it assumes there is nothing to worry about and is wrong, the consequences could be considerably more serious. The problem is that the same tendency to anticipate danger can become extremely creative at a competition. Instead of worrying about what is hiding in the bushes, we wonder whether we will remember the course, make a handling mistake or watch everything go horribly wrong.

The danger is that doubt can start influencing performance. You arrive wondering whether you are good enough. You notice competitors who appear more confident and start thinking about everything that could go wrong. Your body becomes more tense, your communication may subtly change and suddenly you aren't performing in quite the same way you do during training. Then something goes wrong and your mind says, "There you go. I knew I wasn't good enough.". What started as a fear can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and, if that cycle continues, it can eventually start taking the enjoyment away from something you chose to do because you love spending time with your dog.

Change your definition of success

So how do we deal with this? The starting point is recognising that you don't need to wait until all your doubts disappear before you can perform well. Confidence is wonderful when it arrives, but making confidence a requirement for performance gives your feelings far too much power. Instead, become very clear about what success actually means. I encourage people I coach to separate outcomes from behaviours. There is nothing wrong with wanting a clear round, qualification, placing or win. The problem occurs when the result becomes our primary focus because much of what determines that result sits outside our control.

I remember talking to an All Black who told me that his team's definition of success wasn't simply winning; it was producing a great 80-minute performance. They couldn't control how well the opposition played, every refereeing decision, or how the ball bounced. They could play poorly against a weaker opponent and win, or play exceptionally well against South Africa and lose. What they could control was whether they executed the behaviours that gave them the best possible chance of succeeding. Get enough of those behaviours right and, more often than not, the result takes care of itself.

Exactly the same principle applies when you walk an Agility course. Before competing, ask yourself: What does a good performance from me look like today? Not what result do I want, but what do I need to do? Success might mean walking the course thoroughly, being clear about your handling decisions, visualising the run, warming up properly and communicating clearly. It might mean remaining connected with your dog rather than becoming distracted by everyone else. It could even mean recovering quickly if something goes wrong instead of mentally giving up on the rest of the run. These are behaviours you can influence, giving your mind something specific to do rather than something uncertain to worry about.

This doesn't mean pretending the result doesn't matter. If you want to win, then it's OK to want to win. If you desperately want that outcome, there is no need to convince yourself otherwise. The trick is knowing when to think about the outcome and when to put it aside. Once it is time to perform, your attention needs to move towards the behaviours that give you the best chance of achieving the result. You cannot control whether you win, but you can control your preparation. You cannot control another competitor, but you can stop comparing yourself with them. You cannot guarantee everything will go perfectly with your dog, but you can give your dog the clearest, most committed version of you possible.

There is something else to remember when that little voice tells you that you don't belong. You don't have to be the best person at a competition to deserve to be there. You don't even have to feel confident. You simply need to be willing to learn, prepare and give your dog the best performance you can on that particular day. Some remarkably capable people experience doubts about whether they are good enough. The confident person you are watching from across the ring may have their own version of the same voice. We are often comparing our private doubts with somebody else's public appearance, and that is rarely a fair comparison.

I sometimes think back to that workshop in Wellington and the question I never expected: "Does this work for dogs?". Several years later, I think I have a better answer. The mindset techniques I teach don't really work for dogs; they work for the person standing alongside them. Your dog doesn't know that you are experiencing imposter syndrome. Your dog doesn't know that somebody watching from the side of the ring has won more titles or has been competing for longer. Your dog certainly hasn't spent the previous evening worrying about whether the two of you deserve to be there. Your dog simply needs you to be present, prepared and connected with them. Maybe that is something we can learn from our dogs.

So the next time you find yourself at a competition thinking, "I'm not sure I'm good enough to be here", don't waste energy trying to force the thought away. Acknowledge it for what it is: a thought, not a fact. Then bring your attention back to what you can control. Walk the course, make your decisions, do your preparation and connect with your dog. When it is your turn, step forward and give the two of you the best opportunity to perform.

If the mental side of Agility is holding you back, or you find that the person you are in training isn't always the same person who turns up at a competition, please feel free to get in touch with me. Mindset is a skill just like any other aspect of Agility: it can be understood, practised and improved. Over the coming months, I hope to share more practical ideas to help with confidence, nerves, pressure, recovering from mistakes and the other mental challenges that come with competing. We spend an incredible amount of time helping our dogs become better Agility competitors. Perhaps it's worth spending a little time working on the other half of the partnership as well.

Mark Wager

Mark Wager is an Auckland-based mindset coach who works with dog Agility competitors to help them develop confidence, manage competition pressure and perform closer to their potential. He can be contacted at ***mark@ali.org.nz***