

Train Your Mind Using the Puppy Method

The mind can be trained to do almost anything.

It can be trained, for example, to get used to any situation, like sitting in silence for a long time, or concentrating on a task.

However, usually we're training our minds to do what we don't want: be distracted, give in to cravings and urges, complain, avoid discomfort, procrastinate. We do this by rewarding our minds for these behaviors — if we do any of these things, we give the mind something pleasurable or comfortable. That's exactly what we'd want to do to reinforce these behaviors.

Think about it: you're not feeling like doing a task, and the ideal behavior would be to open up to the task, see its importance, and stay focused on it. But the behavior we normally do is put it off (procrastinate) and head to our favorite distractions. The distraction becomes its own reward, so this behavior is reinforced.

We do this all day long. Every day.

What if we wanted to train our minds to do something different?

The Superpower of Training the Mind

We can get the mind used to anything:

- To enjoy eating healthy foods
- To shun junk food
- To not need to have alcohol, coffee, sugar, cigarettes, drugs
- To not need to have video games, Youtube/Netflix, news or blogs, porn or social media
- To stay present and mindful
- To turn towards feelings instead of avoiding them
- To be perfectly OK in discomfort

This then becomes a superpower. We spend so much of our time and energy avoiding things we don't like, and trying to get things that comfort us. What if we could train ourselves to not need to avoid uncomfortable things, and not need to run to comforts? We'd be gods.

If you go to an uncomfortable social event, instead of needing to avoid, hide, or find a comfort zone ... you could just stay in the discomfort and talk to people you don't know. It wouldn't be a problem, because you trained your mind to be fine with the discomfort.

If you normally have to have your comforts (coffee, sugary foods, soda, TV, alcohol, pot, cigarettes), you'll spend a lot of money on them, and in many cases worsen your health and your bank account. You might avoid going places where you can't get these things, and spend a lot of energy to make sure you could have them every day. But what if you trained your mind to not rely on them for comfort and relaxation? You could slowly get the mind used to not needing these, one at a time, so that it would be free.

It's possible, using training methods used to train puppies.

The Puppy Training Method

The mind is like a little puppy. It responds to rewards, but needs to be trained a little at a time, until you get it doing what you want it to do consistently.

Now, I'm not saying we can 100% control our minds. Just that we can apply some reinforcement methods to get it to adjust to whatever we'd like, over time.

So let's look at this puppy training method, and how it can be applied to our minds:

1. **Decide what your target is.** If you want the puppy to do a behavior, you have to decide what that behavior is, exactly. The same with the mind: do you want it to focus, to stay in discomfort in social situations, to turn towards feelings, to be present with bodily sensations when you're stressed, to be compassionate when someone complains? Pick one target at a time.
2. **Define a reward.** What does your mind enjoy? If you like having a cup of tea, or watching TED talks on Youtube, or reading Zen Habits blog posts ... pick one of those for your defined reward. Try to pick something relatively healthy (don't pick donuts), that you can give yourself immediately after you do the behavior.
3. **Train yourself in small doses.** It's unrealistic to expect your mind to stay focused all day long. It gets tired. Trying to be perfect all the time is a good way to set up failure. So instead, pick small doses — 10 minutes of meditation once or twice a day, focused work in 20-minute intervals (and only do 3 intervals) with breaks in between, 30 minutes a day of complaint-free time, for example. Once you've done this training in small doses, you can expand it slowly, and have confidence that you're able to do at least small doses. Gradually, your mind will be trained to do more.
4. **Reward yourself when you hit the target.** If you do 20 minutes of focused work, give yourself a small reward. For example, you get to look at your favorite social media for 2 minutes after 20 minutes of focused work. I like to drink a certain kind of coconut water after doing yoga. It's a treat that reinforces the behavior you just did.
5. **But for difficult targets, have intermediate targets.** If you want the puppy to do something complicated, you have to figure out an intermediate target. For example, if you want him to go to a certain spot, first reward him for going to the right room, then

the right area of the room, then the spot. You can do the same with your mind — if the target is too difficult (a week of meditation), have a smaller target first (10 minutes of meditation) and let yourself slowly move to the target. Reward yourself for the smaller target at first, but then after that gets easy, only reward yourself for hitting the next harder target (20 minutes of meditation).

6. **Don't punish bad behavior. But don't reward it either.** If you give in and do the negative behavior you don't want to do (smoke pot, for example), don't give yourself the reward. But beating yourself up isn't helpful either. It used to be a common practice to smack the dog with a newspaper, but trainers today believe that doesn't work as well as positive reinforcement. What do they do instead? Either ignore the bad behavior entirely (seeking to reward behavior that's at least close to what they're looking for), or making it clear that the bad behavior is not wanted, with a firm "No" or a firm but gentle hand interrupting the bad behavior. With the mind training, this might look like a simple firm interruption of the bad behavior ("Nope, we don't want to keep doing that"), and then trying to go do the good behavior, and getting a reward for it. So mostly ignore the bad behavior or be firm that it's not good, but don't beat yourself up about it.
7. **Train one behavior at a time.** Most people are tempted to try to train everything at once. That's more of an advanced training, once you've trained individual behaviors. For example, if you want to stop watching Youtube, try going half a day without it (rewarding yourself with something else, not Youtube), then after you get good at that, do a full day, then two days at a time, and so on. Then you can do similar training for video games or porn, then social media. But don't do all of them at once, unless you've done them all individually before.

As you can see, this isn't as simple as just flipping a switch. This kind of training can be messy — you'll mess up, and it won't be simple and clear. But if you stick with it, you'll be amazed at what you can get your puppy of a mind to do.