



7 WAYS A COMFORT K9 RELIEVES STRESS

# CREATING COMFORT IN CRISIS

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# INTRODUCTION

## INSPIRED BY BURNOUT

**Burnout** is the overwhelming state of exhaustion and emotional apathy caused by prolonged stress. It is something we are becoming more and more familiar with in the modern workplace and even in our personal lives. In the book, [Burnout: The Secret to Solving the Stress Cycle](#), writers Amelia and Emily Nagoski discuss numerous ways to help prevent or relieve the symptoms of burnout by exploring the overlap between how stress effects the body physically, mentally, and emotionally. Here, we will take these amazing insights and apply them to the work we do with the Comfort K9 Program.

This program utilizes therapy dogs to help address the emotional wellness of emergency responders who are subjected to chronic stress and trauma throughout their careers in public health and safety. Therapy dogs have been known to release endorphins in humans and relieve stress and anxiety, but how exactly does that work? At Paws for Responders, we focus on training our dogs to not only be obedient, well-behaved, and calm in public settings, but also to provide comfort through the scientifically proven strategies listed below.

**1 PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

**2 DEEP, SLOW BREATHING**

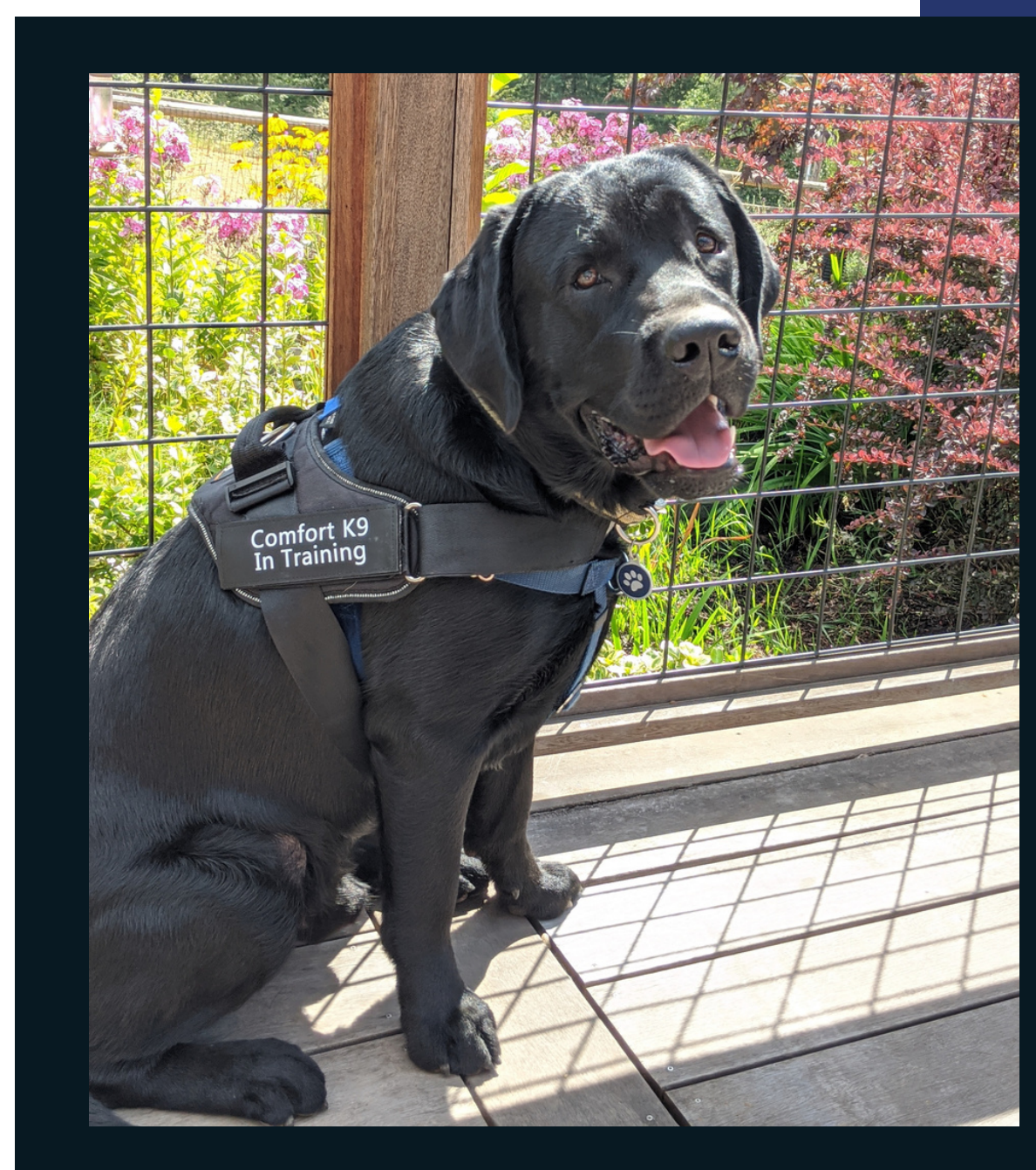
**3 POSITIVE SOCIAL INTERACTION**

**4 LAUGHTER**

**5 AFFECTION**

**6 BIG OL' CRY**

**7 CREATIVE EXPRESSION**







# PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

## TUGGING AT YOUR HEART STRINGS

**Did you know** that when we experience mental or emotional stress, our bodies go through the same stress cycle as if we had experienced physical stress? Your adrenaline spikes and your body prepares for fight or flight behavior to keep you physically safe. If you were being chased by a lion, this would be a useful physical response and you would be able to regulate your stress level by fleeing or fighting to protect yourself. However, when we are experiencing stress while driving, standing still, sitting at a desk, or talking on the phone, we don't often have the luxury of sprinting around the block to bring our bodies back to a state of calmness.

Bring on the puppies! There are plenty of ways that dogs can motivate us to be physically active. A walk or a jog in the park with your pup does wonders to release endorphins, but when you are stuck in the office, you may need other options.

Our dogs love to tug! Playing tug with a dog (especially an 80+lb Labrador) is a great form of physical activity that you can engage in nearly anywhere and anytime. Ok, it can be a little challenging to maintain your composure during an important conversation when a puppy is tugging their little heart out on their favorite rope toy, but any other time works wonderfully for this fun and active game.

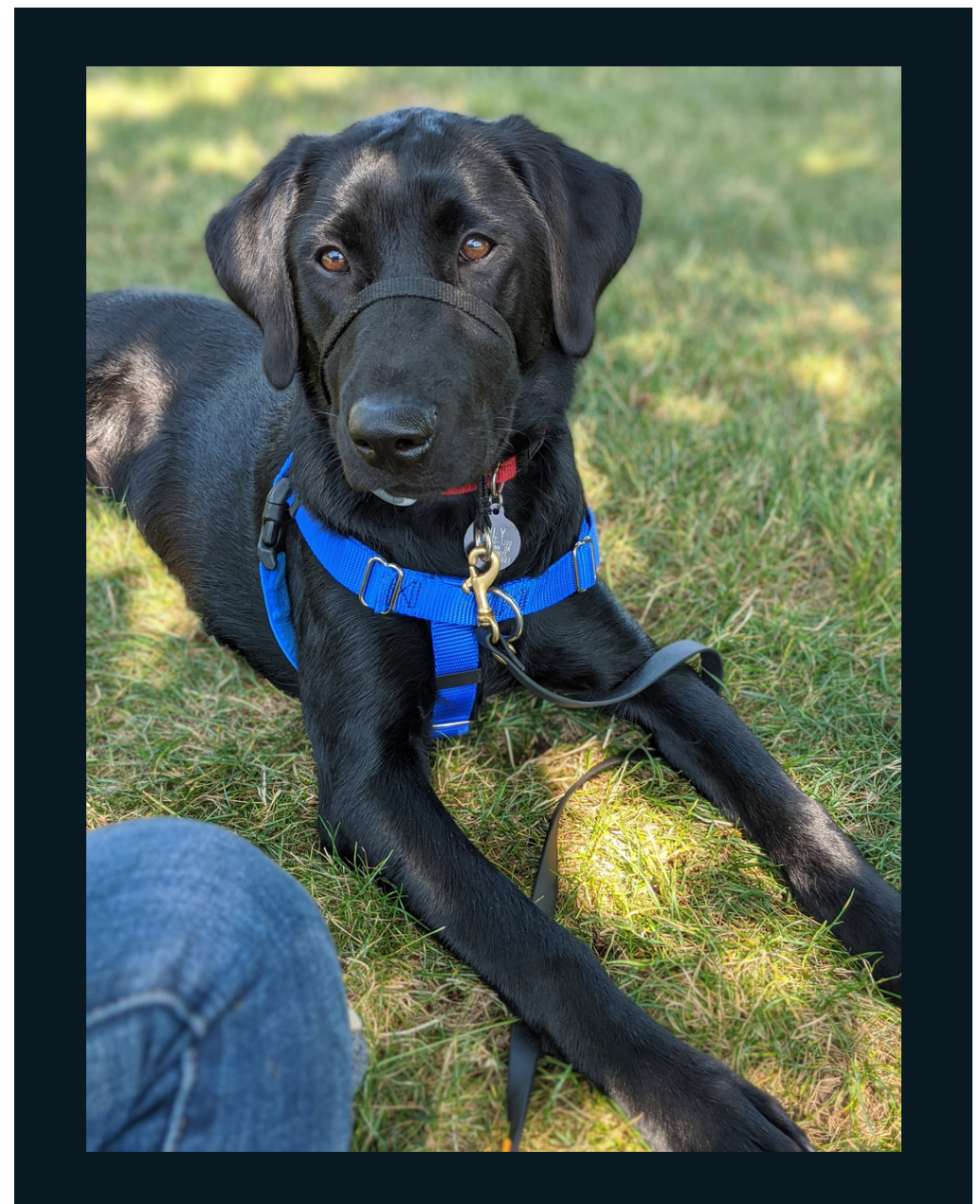
We have heard the concern about tugging causing problem behaviors such as mouthiness and biting at inappropriate objects, but those myths have been busted! Playing tug is one of the best ways to teach puppies to control their emotional state. The physical activity, it turns out, helps humans regulate their stress levels as well. It's also quite satisfying to have a dog instantly sit and release the toy on a single cue after pulling against you with all their might - all with a big happy smile on their face.





Dogs are gifted with the ability to truly be in the present. They don't dwell in the past or panic about the future. Though they absolutely have strong memories and the ability to assume what will likely come next based on previous experiences, they spend their days focused on the now. We can learn from this.

One of the skills we teach our Comfort K9s is the ability to recognize the emotional behavior of the handler. When the handler is calm and anchored, the puppy will respond by settling quietly at their feet. When the handler is feeling playful, the puppy will often engage in play. When the handler needs more space, the puppy can go lay down on their mat.



How often though, are you able to just relax and truly be calm throughout the day? (Especially at work!) These puppies are here to help! Comfort K9s are taught to recognize breathing exercises performed by the handler. When the handler takes a deep, mindful, slow breath, with a long inhale and exhale, the puppies will settle and lay down.

This practice allows for the handlers to focus on their self awareness, their energy, their demeanor, and their breathing. You can't lie to a puppy (ok, you can, but who wants to?). Dogs have been bred for centuries to observe their handlers and respond to their verbal and physical cues. This awesome skill makes them perfect for teaching the human end of the leash that body language matters.

So, for a moment, relax your shoulders, relax your neck, relax your spine, your hips, and your legs, and just take a deep, slow breath. Your body, and your dog, will thank you.

# DEEP, SLOW BREATHING

## TIME TO SETTLE





# POSITIVE SOCIAL INTERACTION

## "WHO'S A GOOD DOG"

**Humans are** social creatures. We crave social interaction on a daily basis and often experience depression and anxiety when our exposure to loved ones is limited. When we are stressed, an effective way to return to a positive mindset is to spend time with a good friend or a close family member. However, even a polite exchange with the local barista or a nice gesture from a colleague, goes a long way to creating that feel-good vibe that so powerfully kicks our bad day to the curb.

Have you ever walked down the sidewalk, passed a stranger, exchanged a quick glance, and continued walking? Of course you have. That's pretty normal. Now, have you been on a similar walk, and passed a similar stranger, while walking a puppy? Typically that interaction is quite different! There is often a huge smile and an "oh my goodness, he's so cute!", or "wow, what a good puppy!", or "can I say HI?!".

These interactions make my day! Though sometimes it's best if passerby adopt a "look but don't touch" policy with my puppy-in-training, I can't help but feel a wave of proud puppy parent wash over me when someone whom I have never met appreciates this adorable little furball that I love so much. On the days where I am grateful for the greetings, having a friendly, stranger-savvy dog is an immediate ice breaker.

Comfort K9s build connections. Whether it's with people you work with passing by in the halls, strangers stealing happy glances out in public, or the staff at your favorite pet store, seeing a Comfort K9 cruising with their handler is guaranteed to bring smiles to their faces. There's not much better than puppies bringing positivity in and throughout the community.





# LAUGHTER

## CANINE CLOWN

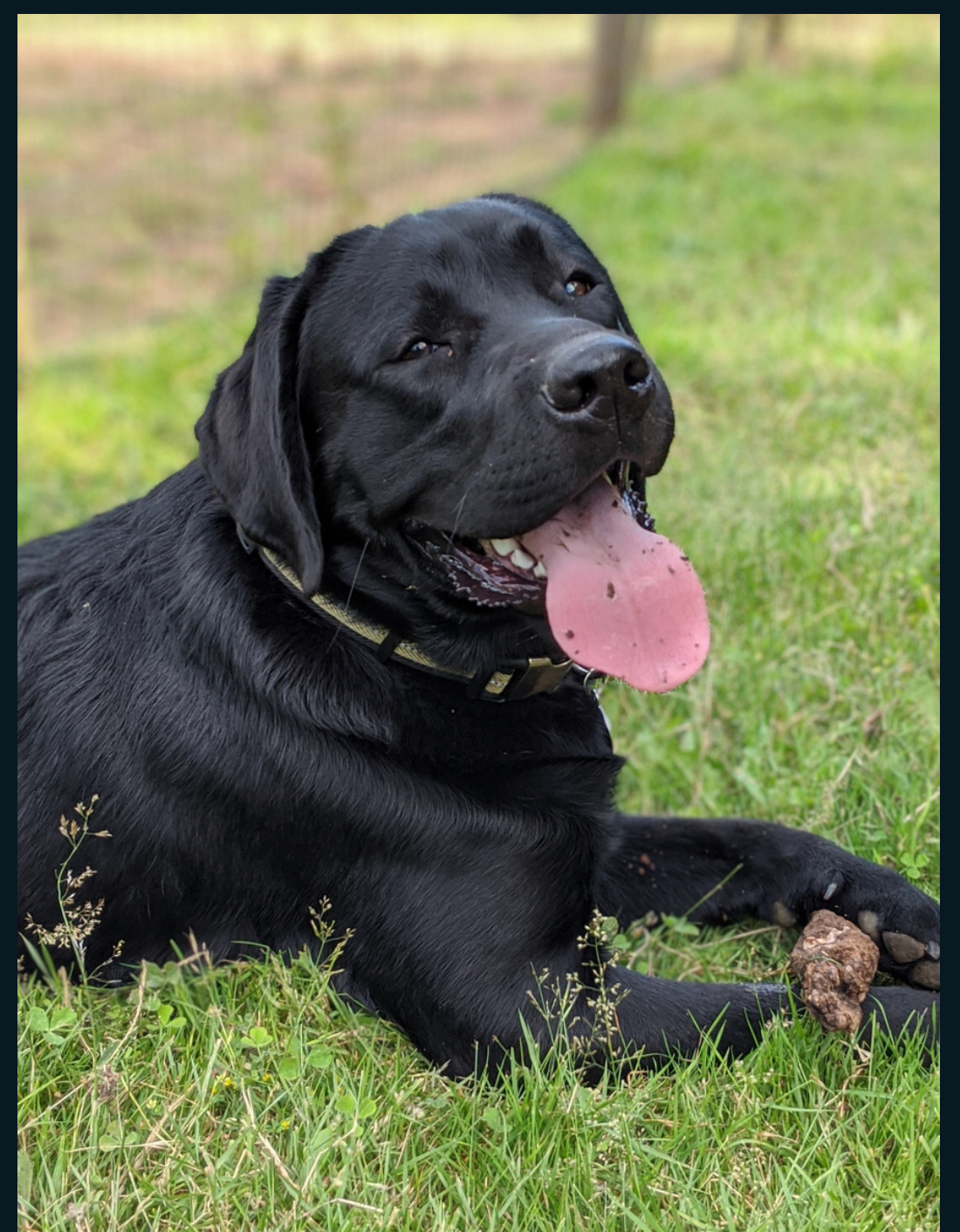
**Laughter** is the best medicine. That big belly laugh that brings tears to your eyes and makes your face hurt from smiling, is guaranteed to make your entire being feel better. Now, we often share little chuckles with our acquaintances throughout the day, but polite laughter, nervous laughter, or laughter that allows you to inconspicuously make a quick exit from the conversation, doesn't really count. This is because those versions are for the benefit of others. Laughter that changes your body chemistry only works if it is genuine.

You know who doesn't require or elicit socially appropriate laughter? Your dog. When you giggle with your pup, you aren't worried about the social pressures of the interaction, you are just having a good time.

When training our Comfort K9s, it is our mission to use positive, humane, ethical, and reinforcing training methods. Making training fun for our dogs and our handlers is a goal that we strive for everyday. So much so, that almost all of the dog's skills are taught through games. We use games to teach loose leash walking, games to teach recall, games to teach leave it, games to teach social skills, and games to teach crating. We play with our dogs when we want them to stay, wait at the door, load up in the car, or spit the thing out of their mouth. We even use games to teach, well, games! Our dogs LOVE playing fetch, tug, find it, and the list goes on.

Because using games is a cornerstone of our training program, it means that engaging with the dog is a form of play. Where there is play there is enjoyment, and where there is enjoyment there is laughter.

Dog smiles make the heart happy. Playing with the dog makes the mind happy. Laughing with the dog makes the soul happy. Find a reason to laugh with your dog today.







# AFFECTION

## HUG IT OUT

**As a Professional** Dog Trainer, I hesitate to recommend hugging dogs. Many dogs find hugs tolerable at best, and many others find hugs to be downright scary. However, Comfort K9s are trained to give hugs! These hugs may be in the form of paws on your shoulders, their front half laying across your lap, a chin resting on your knee, or their back pressed against your leg. Hugs from our dogs may come in different forms but they have a couple things in common.

One, they apply pressure. Pressure therapy is so important for human beings. We get an immediate feeling acceptance when we receive a hug, a handshake, even a pat on the back from someone we love and trust. We naturally feel safe and comforted during this type of contact and the weight of the day begins to slowly leave our bodies as we focus our attention on the affection we feel from that person in that moment. The same is true when we feel that physical connection with our dogs. Tell me you haven't been close to tears when a puppy nuzzled their little face into your lap - if you don't know what I am talking about, just wait until you meet a Comfort K9 - it's life changing.

Two, they are voluntary. Hugs are a two way street. Both parties need to be voluntarily participating in the process for it to be meaningful; otherwise it's just creepy. Yes, petting a dog can be pleasant for the human, but having a dog snuggle back really amplifies the experience. It makes your stress melt away, your blood pressure lower, and your cortisol levels begin to drop. It releases oxytocin and produces feelings of love and attachment... all through a simple hug. Ask a Comfort K9 for a hug, and immediately feel the positive impact it has on your day.





**It's time** for tears. Now, there's a difference between crying because of the stressor (the thing that is causing you to feel stress) and crying because of the stress (the physical response in your body that causes physiological changes and adjusts hormones). Crying because of the former is not what we are discussing here. The way to help your body achieve balance and come back to a pre-stressed state, is to just cry because it feels good.

Emergency responders often are described as as "strong", "courageous", and "heroic". Where as crying is often perceived as "weak", "vulnerable", and "powerless". For a moment though, I want you to really think about this quote from research professor, Brené Brown, "Vulnerability is not about winning or losing. It's having the courage to show up even when you can't control the outcome." The question is, can you truly be courageous without also being vulnerable?

Let's look at crying from a biological standpoint. It is an amazing, cathartic release, but also a physical release of tension and stress. Even those "tough guys" who won't cry on the job, often still cry during those tear jerker movies. Is this because they are weak? Absolutely not. It's because those movies are written to take us through the emotional rollercoaster, provide us with an emotional release, and arrive at a predictable, safe conclusion that leaves us feeling content and satisfied with the experience.

So, hopefully our puppies won't ever *cause* you to cry, but they will surely provide support as you go through the process of releasing emotional tension. In fact, Comfort K9s are taught how to check in with their handlers often and respond to their emotional cues. One Comfort K9 immediately rested her head in the lap of a woman who was crying during an emotional interview. Another licked the tears off the face and hands of someone who was just frustrated and crying after a crappy day. Another just calmly laid on the feet of their handler who was in pain and needed support. When you just need a buddy to be there for you, without judgement, who better than your canine companion?



# BIG OL' CRY

HERE'S A SHOULDER TO CRY ON





# CREATIVE EXPRESSION

## I'VE GOT A FEW TRICKS UP MY...COLLAR?

**We have** discussed the importance of a positive training program from the angle of providing an enjoyable training experience for the dog and handler, but a reinforcement-based learning experience also allows for creative expression. When the dog and the handler are not afraid of failure, but instead focused on the successes of their experience, the possibilities are endless! You may be thinking, "alright, being creative is good, but how does the dog make me creative?". Well, let's discuss the value in teaching tricks.

Your creativity is your limit when it comes to trick training. The Comfort K9s come with a few tricks, taught by their Puppy Raisers, like shake hands and touch a target, but ultimately we encourage the handlers to continue the pup's trick education throughout their careers together. We will give you the building blocks for how tricks are taught, then it is up to you to play with your dog and engage in a new, entertaining learning experience.

So, why teach tricks? Engaging in creative thinking, where you are coming up with something new and working through the detailed process in how to reach your goals, fires up your brain. This creates feelings of excitement and positive anticipation. It encourages you to plan for future steps and activate problem solving strategies. Though I am sure many people are forced to plan ahead and problem solve throughout their workday, when you are applying these skills towards a self-driven goal to create something new, the result reduces the negative stressful symptoms that come from the external pressure to perform.

The question is, which trick are you going to teach next?





# AS A RESULT

## A DOSE OF WELLNESS

**We started** by discussing the book, Burnout, The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle, by the Nagoski sisters, so I would like to present a quote of theirs to describe the process of achieving emotional wellness.

"Completing the [stress] cycle isn't an intellectual decision; it's a physiological shift. Just as you don't tell your heart to continue beating or your digestion to continue churning, the cycle doesn't complete by deliberate choice... To be "well" is not to live in a state of perpetual safety and calm, but to move fluidly from a state of adversity, risk, adventure, or excitement, back to safety and calm, and out again. Stress is not bad for you; *being stuck* is bad for you. Wellness happens when your body is a place of safety for you, even when your body is not necessarily in a safe place...Wellness is thus not a state of being; it is a state of action. "

At Paws for Responders, we are here to support emotional wellness, we encourage learning and education, we provide actionable steps to relieve stress and bring balance. Our Comfort K9s provide enjoyment, opportunity, and companionship. Our methods focus on science-based, easy, efficient, and effective strategies for creating desirable behavior in our dogs. As a result, we are able to create a program that is designed with emergency responders in mind, and we believe we can change the world one puppy at a time.

For more information about our program, please visit the website and contact us soon!

