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SCIENCE New research suggests Dogs can actually smell human emotions

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Words by Holly McHugh

Most dog owners are aware that their canine friends seem to be very sensitive to emotions, adapting their behaviour in response to our moods – one of the many reasons they are known as man’s best friend. Obviously, some are more in tune with us than others. Many are obliviously wagging their tails wanting food whilst you are sat there fretting and anxious.

It is already known they can **see and hear our emotions**. Bellowing at an irritating sibling will no doubt result in a cowering, frightened pooch; while bearing a beaming set of grinning teeth in a cooing fashion, results in a puppy dog-eyed stare back at you. But can they pick up on emotions using solely their schnozzle?

The power of the nose

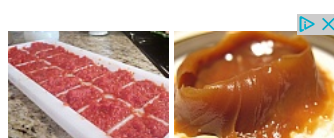
Due to their incredible sense of smell, dogs have assisted us in a number of ways: searching for missing persons and narcotics in the police force, and generally anything that needs to be found, hunting and tracking, helping soldiers detect explosives, and search and rescue dogs, to name a few.

The capability of that wet little nose, has become more and more apparent in recent years. Certain doggy individuals have proven themselves able to sniff out cancer, better than lab tests used to diagnose the disease! **Lucy, a cross between a Labrador Retriever** and an Irish Water Spaniel, learned to sniff out bladder, prostate and kidney cancer, from urine samples.

She has been able to correctly detect cancer 95 percent of the time! Pretty amazing. She is now part of a clinical trial of canine cancer detection, run by a British organization called Medical Detection Dogs. Claire Guest, CEO of the company, was diagnosed with breast cancer early enough that it wouldn’t prove fatal – all thanks to the remarkable hooter of her Labrador Daisy.

“She kept staring at me and lunging in to my chest. It led me to find a lump” Guest recalls.

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It's sometimes said that "dogs can smell your fear", often instilling terror to those who are afraid of the loveable canine, without there being any evidence this is actually true. Although it is true that dogs can detect fear, by observing body language and interpreting sounds, new research has proven that they can in fact, smell our emotions as well!



The Study

A study carried out by **Biagio D’Aniello at the University of Naples Federico, Italy**, examined the role of the olfactory system in dogs, in regards to human emotions.

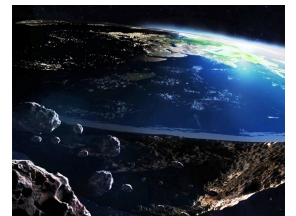
“The role of the olfactory has been largely underestimated, maybe because our own species is more focussed on the visual system” says D’Aniello.

Human volunteers watched videos intended to prompt certain emotions – fear, happiness or neutral. Their sweat was collected and presented to the participating doggies (Labradors and Retrievers) in a controlled space, with the co-presence of their owners and a stranger.

Their heart rates and behaviour were monitored closely. Remarkably, the results showed that they adopted behaviours and stress responses consistent with those experienced by the human volunteers. Those exposed to fear smells, demonstrated more signs of stress and anxiety, than those exposed to neutral or happy smells.

They sought more reassurance from their owners and became more wary of strangers, with much more owner directed behaviours, and displayed elevated heart rates. When exposed to happy sweat, they presented more affiliation with strangers than with their owners, being generally more inquisitive and happy, and also had significantly lower heart rates.

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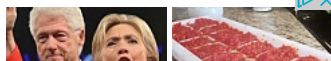
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These fascinating findings suggest that **emotional communication is facilitated by chemosignals (human body odours)**, and our canine friends have a sniff gift that enables them to detect this. It also suggests that they are extremely sensitive to our emotions, adopting them as their own and exhibiting the same behaviour as us. So the chances are, if you're happy, then so is your dog!

What's their secret?

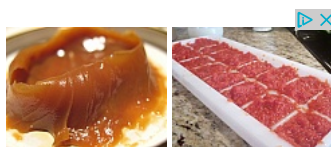
Dog's noses are special - Scientists say they are 10,000 to 100,000 times as acute as ours! "If you make the analogy to vision, what you and I can see at a third of a mile, a dog could see more than 3,000 miles away and still see as well" says James Walker, former director of the Sensory Research Institute at Florida State University.

So, what brings about their shark-like sense of smell?

Firstly, they possess up to 300 million olfactory receptors in their noses, compared to a measly 6 million in humans. Their region of the brain that analyses smell, is 40 times greater than ours and their nose also functions completely differently.

Instead of both smelling and breathing through the same airways in their nose as we do, dogs contain a fold of tissue inside their nostrils, which separates smelling and respiration in two different flow paths. When dogs exhale, the air exits through the slits in the side of their noses in a swirling manner, drawing in new odours continuously.

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As if all of this isn't remarkable enough, they also have a second nose - known as the Jacobson's organ. It picks up **specifically on pheromones that advertise sex-related details**. This organ transfers signals to its own part of the brain entirely devoted to interpreting these signals. It's a shame some men haven't evolved a second nose to help them understand the meaning of "not interested".

It is unknown whether dog's emotional capabilities are due to human domestication, allowing them to evolve a greater understanding of human emotions and sociality, or whether they are actually innately empathetic as a species. Either way, our loyal companions (or at least some of them) are far more emotionally intelligent than we think!

Dogs can smell your emotions

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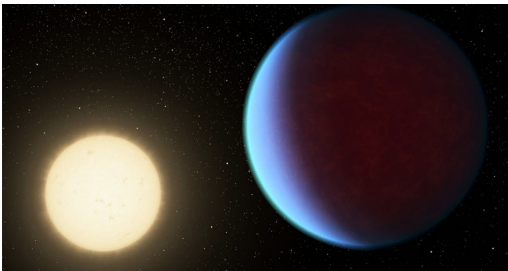
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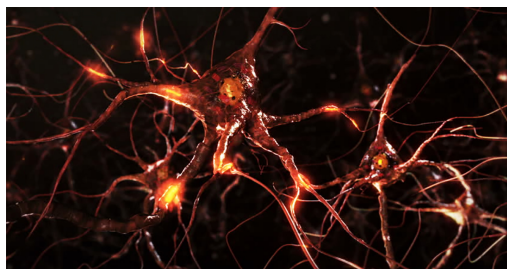
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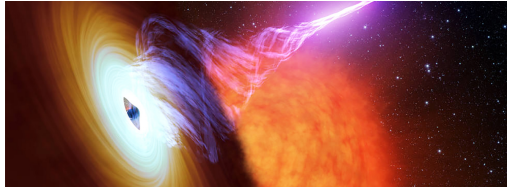
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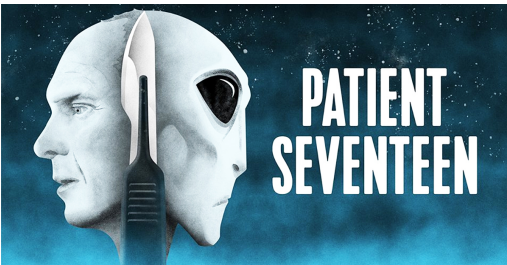
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