

Do our dogs REALLY think?

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By Guiding Eyes

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by Guiding Eyes graduate Deni Elliott

The question, from a new guide dog user, surprised me. I had heard this question plenty of times from people who don't know dogs and from some pet dog owners as well. But here was someone worried that she was putting her life in the paws of a salivating, shedding real-world example of Pavlov's classical conditioning. She suspected her dog was in it just for the cookies.

Now, Guiding Eyes Alberta has been known to drool in anticipation of a particularly tasty treat, but it is her excellent reasoning ability that gets us through our day. Our dogs think. They want the treats. Their exceptional thinking skills help guarantee that they eventually get what they want.



I love my own job. But, I've yet to turn down a paycheck for the hard work that I do. Treats are the guide dog's well-deserved paycheck. Our dogs are motivated by both their creature comforts and their reasoning ability – just as their people are.

My mile walk from home to office gives me time to observe the critical thinking that Alberta uses to get us safely there.

Long ago, at Guiding Eyes, she learned to avoid obstacles and to ignore handler commands that would put the team in danger.

To do her work currently, Alberta must understand that a busy street in St. Petersburg, Florida requires the same vigilance as crossing roads in White Plains, NY. She must differentiate between the eight streets where she must stop from the dozens of driveways where she usually doesn't. She ignores driveways. Unless a car is driving out. Then she knows to wait.

She needs to find both edges of those eight streets whether our crossing takes us down and up curbs or to curb cuts that incline to and from the line of traffic.

If Alberta is also anticipating the treat she'll get when we get safely to school, let's applaud her ability to multi-task. While walking, I am looking forward to the cup of coffee I'll get when we

arrive.

I stopped carrying treats in my pocket once I realized how well Alberta had shaped my behavior. It started a day in our first months of work together. We had hurried across campus, late for a meeting. Alberta settled under the conference table. I engaged in the human activity at hand. Alberta poked my pocket with her nose. “You’re right, Sweetie, I forgot your cookie,” I whispered, and gave her the requested treat.

Soon, Alberta poked me when I was
distracted by teaching, or by a meeting
or when I was involved in conversation.



My hand automatically went to pocket to retrieve the forgotten treat.

Until the day that I realized. There was no forgotten treat.

It became a habit for me to give Alberta a treat whenever she poked me. With treats no longer nearby, Alberta learned to wait. Now she gets engrossed in her problem-solving, trusting that the paycheck will come later.

For example, Alberta has learned from her own observations and logical connections how to spend part of each night on my bed. She almost always starts out the night on her mat on the floor. I almost always wake up with her snuggled in my arms.

I get into bed. Alberta watches and waits. When my breathing sounds like I am sleeping, Alberta checks in. She stands next to me. She taps her nails on the wooden floor. She snorts. She gives a soft whine.

If, half asleep, I mumble, “Go to bed,” she returns to her mat. Or she indicates her annoyance by stomping out of the room to sleep elsewhere for a while.

Soon, Alberta is back, looking at me, checking again. Finally, she catches me too deeply asleep to respond to her tests. Light as a feather, she hops up on my bed. By the time that I realize that she is in my arms, it’s all too cozy for me to send her away.

Because Alberta can reflect our past experience, she knows that the pay off will come. When we get to the office. Home. To the hotel room. Or when I am too asleep to veto her request.

What she does get every minute of every day is my love and praise – and our never-ending adventures together.

Guiding Eyes dog Alberta aces the “marshmallow test,” in which she successfully ignores a tasty looking bowl of treats.