



Innocent until proven **Guilty?**

What science tells us about
guilt in domesticated dogs





Widely held belief

Science aside, many dog owners believe their pet dogs can comprehend their own wrongdoings, and can feel complex emotions such as guilt and spite. In order for this to be true, dogs must first be self-aware, and have an understanding of 'right' and 'wrong', as well as their owners' expectations of where that line is drawn. That's a tall order for a non-primate species.





Self-Awareness

Let's break these requirements down. First is self-awareness. There are different levels to this, such as understanding that you exist separately from your environment, and the ability to think and reflect on your own thoughts and feelings, as well as those of others (Theory of Mind). Studies support physical self-awareness in dogs, but there's little evidence for Theory of Mind.



I'm standing on a mat.
I need to get off to
pick up the ball that's
stuck to the mat



My owner feels
angry I dug up the
flowers





Guilt

Guilt is a feeling of remorse for a wrongdoing. To feel this, your dog must be capable of thinking in the past tense, and applying this to the present. He must also understand you have thoughts, feelings, and what these feel like. Next, he must understand what is and isn't viewed by you as 'acceptable', and that an action he has exhibited has crossed this boundary, and resulted in your personal dissatisfaction. Lastly he must feel remorse for his action.





Guilty as charged?


That's an awful lot to assume your dog is capable of understanding. They are very intelligent animals, but guilt is probably a long shot. But what if he looks SO guilty? Well, here it gets interesting. Studies show the 'guilty look' is your dog reacting to your change in body language, and anticipating that you may become 'scary'. When you witness a wrongdoing, do you shout, speak in a lower tone, or change your expression?





Saving face

Science tells us humans are great at reading other people's facial expressions. So good, in fact, that we apply these skills to other species. People lowering their head and having 'puppy dog eyes' may signal guilt. In dogs, this is associated with fear and submission, and not necessarily an understanding of why your face and body is changing in a way that worries them.



**Mum has arrived!
But oh no, she is
frowning and her
voice is low**



**She's standing
over me tensely,
what's going on?**

**If I do this face
she goes back to
normal quicker**



Avoiding the situation

There is more evidence for the theory that your dog is showing submissive behaviours reacting to your body language, than the assumption they are feeling guilty. This can transform how you interact with your dog. It is therefore important to respond neutrally to 'naughtiness', and in future make boundaries very clear (here, by moving the flowers) and make other options available.





Ongoing problem?

If you've an ongoing problem with your dog's behaviour which you're struggling to manage, it's fundamental to avoid showing your frustration via verbal or physical punishment. This can worsen the problem as your dog may become frightened of you. If you or your dog are struggling, get into contact with a qualified behaviourist.

