



Big Dog, Little Dog

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled “All Psyched Up” for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of “Life is An Adventure...every step of the way” and “Open for Business Success” is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email office@drlindahancock.com

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There used to be a television commercial where a woman stood with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. The whole idea of this advertising campaign was to compare butter to a margarine product. The underlying message was that if you were listening to the angel, you would be making the correct choice.

There is a learning theory that is similar. It argues that each of us has a big dog and a little dog inside of us. We are controlled by the one that we feed. The one we feed the most takes over and controls us.

I have used these two examples with clients who struggle with obsessive behaviors or addictions. Most tell me that they know the risks and consequences they will face but ignore them until they have indulged. One lady with bulimia told me that she goes into a dreamy state until the gallon of ice cream in front of her is gone. Then the realization of what she has done leads her to the bathroom where she vomits. This is followed by guilt, shame and secrecy. Rituals, patterns and cycles become entrenched over time.

Often people go for long periods of time without smoking, drinking, using drugs or abstaining from activities such as gambling. Then, without any warning, they go back to doing what they thought they had learned to control. And around they go again!

We all tend to do this at times. The angel is screaming at us to beware, but we turn the volume down with statements like "Once won't hurt", "I'll set a limit" or "I deserve this because I have done well". Then the "once" becomes "twice" and more. The "limit" is forgotten and the success of the past has disappeared.

Big Dog and Little Dog is basically about where we put our attention. We can either focus on the things that we need to be doing in our lives or else focusing on the things that we want to do.

Inactivity and irresponsibility can also be an issue that has a similar cycle. The angel is reminding us to file our taxes, finish the laundry or show up on time for work. But we just want to have one more cup of coffee, play another computer game or watch a movie. The result is that our tasks don't get done and that brings both chaos and stress into our world. Then the emotions start. Anger, anxiety and guilt can ruin the rest of the day.

Here are some hints to prevent another lap around the cycle:

1. Get honest with yourself. Make a clear decision about what you truly want as a goal. This has to be something that you can connect with and not just something you "should" do or something that someone else thinks you should do.
2. Write your goal down on paper and post it in a place where you will see it frequently during the day.
3. Draw a vertical line down the middle of another piece of paper. On the left-hand side write all the things that you will enjoy because of reaching your goal. On the right-hand side list all the consequences or things you will lose if you do not achieve the goal. Review these lists every day.
4. On a third sheet of paper, write a list of things that you can do to distract yourself from temptation when it appears. (You don't buy a fire extinguisher when the flames are licking at your heels - be prepared)
5. Update your address book with the contact information of supporters who you can contact when needed.
6. Think in small timeframes rather than long-term periods. It is easier to invest an hour a day in yardwork for example, than using "all or nothing" thinking.
7. Remember that every day is a new start. If you slipped the day before, forgive yourself and begin again. If you did well the day before, congratulate yourself and begin again.

Also, think about the fact that if you do have a pet, you don't feed it a huge amount and then forget it. You provide daily care. It is the same with your goals and needs. One day at a time.