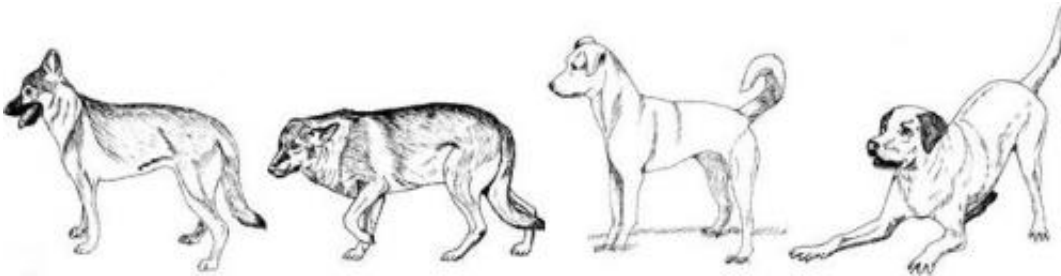


Domestic dogs display empathic response to distress in humans

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(Phys.org) -- Research from Goldsmiths, University of London suggests domestic dogs express empathic behaviour when confronted with humans in distress.

Dr Deborah Custance and Jennifer Mayer, both from the Department of Psychology, developed an innovative procedure to examine if [domestic dogs](#) could identify and respond to [emotional](#) states in humans.

Eighteen [pet dogs](#), spanning a range of ages and breeds, were exposed to four separate 20-second experimental conditions in which either the dog's owner or an unfamiliar person pretended to cry, hummed in an odd manner, or carried out a casual conversation.

The dogs demonstrated behaviours consistent with an expression of

empathic concern. Significantly more dogs looked at, approached and touched the humans as they were crying as opposed to humming, and no dogs responded during talking. The majority of dogs in the study responded to the crying person in a submissive manner consistent with empathic concern and comfort-offering.

"The humming was designed to be a relatively novel behaviour, which might be likely to pique the dogs' curiosity. The fact that the dogs differentiated between crying and humming indicates that their response to crying was not purely driven by [curiosity](#)," explained Dr Custance. "Rather, the crying carried greater emotional meaning for the dogs and provoked a stronger overall response than either humming or talking."

The study also found that the dogs responded to the person who was crying regardless of whether it was their owner or the unfamiliar person: "If the dogs' approaches during the crying condition were motivated by self-oriented comfort-seeking, they would be more likely to approach their usual source of comfort, their owner, rather than the [stranger](#)," said Jennifer. "No such preference was found. The [dogs](#) approached whoever was crying regardless of their identity. Thus they were responding to the person's emotion, not their own needs, which is suggestive of empathic-like comfort-offering behaviour."

More information: The full paper has been published by SpringerLink and can be viewed [here](#). The paper is also available at Goldsmiths Research Online [here](#).

Provided by Goldsmiths, University of London

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