

# Chapter 1

## Diagnosed as blind – what now?

### *How will you deal with it?*

When I found out that my dog was blind, at first, I was simply bewildered – and then I felt guilty and sad. I was also angry as it seemed so unjust, and laid the blame on anyone who happened to be around. Fundamentally, I was powerless, and it was probably this that caused me to feel fearful about how to cope with my dog.

These kinds of feelings are common when people are confronted with the fact that their dog is going blind. If the blindness is sudden, you are thrown into the situation and have to adapt as quickly as possible. If your dog goes blind more gradually, you have some time to adjust to the new situation and come to terms with it.

Blindness with no prospect of a cure means that it is up to the owner to make the adjustments and changes, and regard it as an opportunity. We call our domestic dogs ‘man’s best friend,’ and this is our chance to be a best friend to

our dog, and support him or her in their hour of need.

It is normal and important to be sad, because only then can we learn how to deal with the situation. Many owners are bewildered, as I was; some are shocked and immediately think that the only course of action is to have their pet put to sleep; others simply take everything as it comes.

If you belong to the first group, it is important to be aware that your animal will have less of a problem with his loss of sight than would you. One sense will be lost, yes, but this will serve to sharpen the others; as it is, with up to 100 times as many olfactory receptors as a human, a dog really ‘sees’ with his nose, anyway! He will have to adapt to his new circumstances, but he will make the best of it.

You may not be able to face facts immediately after the diagnosis; you may, perhaps, not want to believe it, and will seek a second and even a third opinion, and it’s



- Being blind doesn't
- prevent Elliott from
- having fun in the
- water!



right that you should do this. Vets are human, too, and, as such, can make mistakes, so don't shy away from consulting several vets as this will also help you come to terms with the situation and slowly get to grips with it, and the reality of it. It is important that veterinary staff also take care of the dog owner, clarify issues, and reduce his or her anxiety.

It is a fact that blind dogs can live wonderful lives: they can run across fields, catch balls, relax in the sun, or stare out of the window for hours. And you needn't feel isolated – even if you do at first – because you don't know anyone else with a blind dog, or have considered whether or not there may exist contented dogs which cannot see. You may not be shown much understanding in your immediate environment post-diagnosis, which can increase your feelings of isolation, and it's okay to cry and



express your pain because of this, though I do think it's important not to burden your dog with this unnecessarily. The human has to be there for the dog in this case, and not the other way around.

The final phase in the process is acceptance, following which, you will come to understand that a blind dog is really not very different to a sighted one.

The phases that you may go through demonstrate that you are normal. You don't have to suppress any of them – it is human to be

# MY DOG IS BLIND

Although blind, Hubble was always very interested in what was going on!

angry and sad, because loss causes sadness – but you must not forget that this is not about you; it is about your dog – a living being with feelings and fears, strengths and weaknesses. Be there for your best friend.

## How will your dog deal with it?

Just like humans, dogs are individuals with unique characters, and, because of this, each will cope differently with blindness.

A dog that has been blind from birth doesn't know any different, and so doesn't miss what he's never had; dogs that go blind, however, have first to get used to their new situation. Some will need longer than others to do this, but sooner or later all of them will achieve this, provided they can rely on their owner to become their 'guide person.'

Loss of sight, blindness and visual impairment have a variety of causes, are analysed on an individual basis, and experienced and managed in different ways. It is possible that some dogs may exhibit depressive behaviour initially, whereas others may suffer from nervous aggression; some scarcely change at all. Your dog's reaction depends on certain factors:

- How old is your dog?
- Is he healthy and therefore able to adapt quickly to this new state,



or does he have infirmities that could make it harder to adjust? For instance, is he deaf?

- How was his basic compliance before loss of sight occurred: did he come reliably when called? A dog who was not compliant before he went blind is obviously not going to behave any better once he is blind!

- What type of personality does he have, and how is his relationship with people? Is your dog shy or self-confident, independent-minded or timid?

- Are there any other dogs in the immediate environment from whom he could get his bearings?

- How much time does the owner have for the pet that is losing his sight?

## Fear and aggression

Many dogs react to blindness with fear and aggression. Put yourself in your dog's place: he can no longer see, and, initially, has no way of assessing danger. Sometimes he may

be frustrated and angry because he has not yet memorised his environment and where everything is; he may still bump into a chair, and have to shake himself and carry on. From time to time he will perhaps be bad-tempered and over-wrought, because this new situation is very tiring for him, so he may react by growling because he is frightened and can't get his bearings. This is all completely normal and to be expected.

To help with this have areas in your home where your dog can be completely relaxed and peaceful, but still with you, to reassure him and soothe his anxiety.

Observe your dog. Where is his favourite spot to lie? It is important to really leave the dog in peace, if that's what he wants, and ensure that all family members do likewise.

If your dog should growl on occasion when you approach, do not scold him, as he is only trying to tell you in his way that he doesn't feel good and doesn't want you to come any closer. Before this happens, it is likely he will exhibit behaviour that shows how he is feeling, so study your dog in order to help him where appropriate.

## Depression

Dogs can suffer from depression in the same way that people can, and this may be expressed by a decrease in activity and loss of interest in pursuits that he enjoyed before losing his sight, such as playing or going for a walk.

If you feel that your dog is depressed, consider whether he could be this way because of how

– but lives life to the full!

you are feeling. Our dogs are the mirrors of our soul, so maybe you are projecting your feelings onto him. Take care and try to ensure that your dog is shielded from your mood if this is the case.

## Dependence

Some dogs can lapse into total dependence on you, no longer able to walk without their human by their side, which demonstrates a lack of self-confidence. Whether he was already lacking in self-confidence before losing his sight, or whether it declined after he went blind is of significance, but, in both cases, sensitive handling is needed to enable him to develop more self-assurance. This book will give you ideas for games and exercises that will help you achieve this objective.

Hattie was always very independent.



See page 12 for more about Hubble and Hattie