Dogs, Comfort, and the Awkward Zone

by Jen Marr

I didn't set out to build a human-care model. I set out to understand why a golden retriever could do it better than we humans could.

In the weeks after the Sandy Hook Elementary tragedy, I watched comfort dogs move through rooms where words were failing. They didn't offer advice. They didn't reach for fixes or tidy conclusions. They showed up - quietly, consistently, and without judgment. In those moments, grief had somewhere to land. In the aftermath of a crisis, that's what's needed most.

I kept thinking: if dogs can do this, why can't we?

The dogs gave me a front-row seat to the skills most of us were never taught: how to enter pain without trying to erase it, how to be with someone when there's nothing to say, how to offer steadiness instead of solutions.

For five years I showed up at Sandy Hook Elementary with a team of comfort dogs. We weren't there to fix anything. We were there to help people feel seen and validated. Over those years, three observations became the foundation of my work:

Observation 1: Caring emotions don't always translate into caring action. After Sandy Hook, sixty-five thousand stuffed animals arrived in a town of twenty-seven thousand. Feeling compassion and providing comfort are not the same skill.

Observation 2: Comfort is a long-haul of small acts. For five years I asked one simple question in hallways and offices: "How's today?" It opened the door if someone wanted to talk and still signaled, "I'm here," if they didn't. These micro-moments, repeated over time build trust.

Observation 3: When we give, we receive. Opening our hearts to comfort others, and to receive comfort back, creates the deepest kind of relationships. We feel seen, heard, acknowledged, cared for, trusted, validated, and loved.

During those five years, every day, I kept asking the same question: "What now?" The answer was always the same: keep showing up. Care isn't the one-and-done activity that too many of us fall into.

The dogs were modeling simple, reliable behaviors that met human needs more skillfully than we did. My five favorites:

1. **They recognize when you're hurting.** Dogs pay attention. They "know" when you need them.

2. **They don't need words.** Sometimes silence and presence are the best gifts.

3. **They listen.** No advice. No fixing. No loss of confidentiality.

4. **They want to be with us.** Dogs don't withdraw when life gets hard. They're pack animals, and so are we.

5. **They are loyal.** They assume the best in us and give us the benefit of the doubt.

So why can't we be more like them? Enter what I call the Awkward Zone: that shaky space between seeing someone's struggle and knowing what to do. Our hearts want to help, but our thoughts and actions aren't so sure. We become trapped by these barriers:

Emotional Barriers (we talk ourselves out of acting):

· **The Doubter**—Driven by fear. "What if I make it worse? What if it's not the right time?"

· **The Deflector**—Driven by busyness. "Someone else is better equipped—and I have my own problems."

Action Barriers (we engage, but in unhelpful ways):

· **The Fixer**—Dives in with solutions before understanding needs (think: the teddy bears).

· **The Avoider**—Stands face-to-face with pain and leaves the person unacknowledged.

The Awkward Zone isn't a flaw in your character; it's a missing skill set. And like any skill, it can be learned.

Over the past decade I've developed programs, assessments, and trainings - and written books - to help ordinary people support one another when life feels too big, too tender, or too complicated. I call it Showing Up: simple steps, steady presence, and the message, "You don't have to handle this alone; I'm with you."

Showing Up reminds us that, in the end, we don't need to be perfect, but we do need each other.

And if a golden retriever could teach me that, I'm pretty sure you can learn it, too.

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Drawing on thirty years of cross-sector leadership and twelve years of research in relational health, Jen Marr equips leaders with evidence-based tools to master the human side of disruption. As the Founder and CEO of Showing Up LLC, Jen has built a measurable, scalable, and sustainable framework that has certified trainers across the globe and transformed cultures in healthcare, law, education, and professional sports. A sought-after keynote speaker and bestselling author of Showing Up and Lifting Up, her innovative relational framework helps people and organizations own the uncertainty and transform every challenge into growth.