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Destruction of Dog Behavioral Disorders

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Abstract

This paper explores the causes and manifestations of destructive behavior in dogs, emphasizing behavioral disorders such as separation anxiety, redirected activities, vacuum activities, and stereotypies. We discuss how improper environmental conditions and unmet biological needs contribute to destructive chewing, excessive digging, and self-harm. The paper provides evidence-based strategies

for prevention and behavior modification, including interactive toys, desensitization techniques, and environmental enrichment. Additionally, the role of behavioral therapy and unconventional methods such as Reiki and homeopathy is examined. This study highlights the importance of owner education in reducing destructive behaviors in domestic dogs.

Keywords: Dog Behavior, Destructive Chewing, Separation Anxiety, Behavioral Disorders, Environmental Enrichment

Introduction

Animal behavior includes all observable activities of an organism, including phases of stillness, rest, and sleep. A living organism is never said to be doing nothing. If no active forms of behavior are observed, involving movement or the motion of only certain body parts, it is said that the animal is resting, relaxing, or sleeping.

Depending on its genetic basis, animal behavior can be innate, learned, or a combination of both. Based on the influence of the social component, behavior can be individual or social.

Innate behaviors include simple reflexes, complex reflexes, and fixed action patterns. Fixed action patterns are behaviors that manifest in animals of the same species in the same way and in the same sequence of activities.

Learned behaviors are influenced by the animal's environment and its ability to perceive, learn, and gain experience. However, their expression still requires a hereditary predisposition.

Behavioral patterns characteristic of most members of the same species represent the behavioral norm. If behavior falls within this norm, it is referred to as physiological behavior. If it deviates slightly from the behavioral norm, it is considered a behavioral change. If it significantly deviates from the behavioral norm, it is classified as a pathological form of behavior.

Animals are constantly exposed to changes occurring within their own bodies or in their environment. All these changes threaten to disrupt the organism's state of equilibrium, in which all its functions remain within physiological limits. This state of equilibrium is called homeostasis.

Animals adapt to changes within their bodies and environment in three ways:

- Through slow changes in external appearance
- Through relatively rapid internal changes and rapid behavioral changes
- Through rapid behavioral changes

Therefore, the primary role of behavior is to maintain the organism's homeostasis by achieving a sense of satisfaction, comfort, pleasure, and security.

How Destructive Forms of Dog Behavior Develop

For an animal to exhibit a certain type of behavior, the following elements must be present:

- A cause for displaying a specific behavior (drive, need, motivation);
- Proper functioning of the neuroendocrine system and centers responsible for drives;
- A trigger (stimulus);
- A substrate or material necessary to satisfy drives, needs, or motivations (abiotic or biotic stimuli): food, water, shelter, resting place, bedding, substrate for exploratory behavior (digging, scratching, sniffing), a mate, offspring, mother, an individual of the same social rank, sufficient space for movement, etc.;
- Proper functioning of the sensory system, allowing the animal to perceive stimuli from the external environment or its own body;
- Proper processing of received information in the brain;
- Proper functioning of the motor system;
- The ability for the animal to access the substrate or material needed to satisfy a particular need, which is influenced by environmental factors (e.g., presence of danger or obstacles) and the ability to move freely toward the substrate;
- The ability for the animal to choose a suitable substrate to satisfy its need;
- The ability for the animal to select a behavioral strategy to establish control over the necessary substrate;
- The ability for the animal to choose when to satisfy a particular need;
- The ability for the animal to choose where to satisfy a particular need.

The absence or improper functioning of even one of these elements, or the inability to establish connections between them, can cause changes and disorders in a dog's behavior. If an animal cannot exhibit certain behaviors or satisfy its needs over an extended period, a behavioral deficit occurs. This deficit is acceptable if it does not exceed 15%. However, if it surpasses this threshold, behavioral disorders may develop, potentially leading to destructive behavior (Vučinić, Nenadović, 2021).

Classification of Behavioral Disorders

Behavioral and pathological disorders are dysfunctional and purposeless, harming the animal itself, other animals in its environment, its owner, and others who come into contact with it.

1. Classification Based on Causes

Behavioral disorders and pathological behaviors can be categorized as:

Primary disorders

Secondary disorders

Disorders and pathological behaviors in aging animals

2. Classification Based on Manifestation

a) Reactivity Disorders (Areactivity, Hyporeactivity, Hyperreactivity)

In pathological reactivity, an animal's behavioral response to an attractive or aversive stimulus may be:

Absent (areactivity)

Reduced in intensity (hyporeactivity)

Exaggerated (hyperreactivity) compared to a normal physiological reaction

Areactivity and hyporeactivity are seen in animals that, due to housing conditions, cannot control stimuli in their environment. These animals become apathetic and depressed, and their diminished reactivity results from learned helplessness—they have realized that all behavioral strategies to cope with environmental stressors are ineffective, leading to the absence of normal species-specific behavioral responses.

Conversely, hyperreactivity is often a result of chronic fear or fear-like states, particularly in animals housed in intensive systems. It is mainly expressed as a defensive reaction toward stimuli perceived as causing physical and emotional distress. The animal tries to defend itself or avoid these stimuli through intense behavioral responses, deviating from the species' behavioral norms.

b) Redirected Activities

Disorders where behavior is redirected to an alternative substrate due to the lack of an appropriate target.

These behaviors resemble normal activities (e.g., chewing on furniture, door frames, baseboards).

Redirected behaviors occur due to long-term frustration in highly motivated animals unable to perform a desired behavior or achieve a behavioral goal.

c) Vacuum Activities

Disorders where the correct and alternative substrates are both absent, but the behavior is still expressed in a way that resembles normal behavior (e.g., air licking, tongue rolling, excessive licking of objects).

d) Stereotypies

Pathological behaviors that are non-functional, always occurring in the same repetitive pattern of purposeless motor activities, often resulting in self-injury.



Picture 1: Example of Stereotypic Behavior – Circling.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhAWo7PA9MQ>)

Oral stereotypies (e.g., excessive licking, air gulping)

Hygienic behavior stereotypies

Example of self-injury due to stereotypy:

Excessive paw licking leading to self-mutilation



Picture 2: Paw licking behavior

(<https://www.sydneyvetspecialists.com.au/why-do-dogs-lick-their-toes-excessively/>)

e) Self-Injury

Represents the extreme stage of emotional distress, where an animal inflicts harm on itself through various pathological behavioral strategies (e.g., self-biting, excessive licking of body parts).

Destructive Behaviors in Dogs

With the significant increase in the dog population, destructive behavior in dogs has also become more widespread. When performing desensitization for certain behaviors, it is crucial to pay attention to the dog's body language to ensure that the modification of unwanted behavior does not go in the wrong direction.

The main reason for destructive behavior in dogs is the inability to satisfy their basic needs, such as chewing, boredom relief, and issues related to separation anxiety.

In the past, dogs were primarily kept in yards, used for hunting, or worked alongside humans. Today, their role has changed significantly, and they are often not given the opportunity to meet their fundamental needs.

Destructive Chewing

It is well known that dogs have a strong need to chew and put everything in their mouths. This behavior is completely normal, as dogs are natural chewers. In many cases, they use chewing as a way to relieve stress.

Puppies do not know what is appropriate to chew on until they are taught. This can be very frustrating, as puppies will chew on anything within their reach and often destroy objects in the process. A dog owner's favorite sneakers, clothing, cables, or plants can easily become victims of destructive chewing.

When it comes to puppies, this behavior can be effectively managed by controlling their environment and enriching their living space.

Some owners may think their puppy is deliberately trying to make their life miserable, but in reality, dogs have different reasons for chewing on everything. Here are some key reasons why dogs chew:

- Puppies chew because they are teething and have no redirection toward appropriate chewing objects.
- Puppies explore objects with their mouths to understand what they are and how they function. Humans use their hands to touch and examine things, but dogs lack this ability.
- Chewing helps dogs release excess energy and stress.
- Dogs have an instinctive need to chew.

All dogs, regardless of age, have a natural urge to chew. The good news is that you can control and teach your dog what is acceptable and what is not when it comes to chewing. (Landsberg G. *et al.*, 2003)^[2]

How to Stop Destructive Chewing in Dogs

Provide your dog with appropriate chew toys.

Be strict in distinguishing between items that are and aren't meant for chewing.

Redirect your dog to an appropriate chewing object.

Prevention is key and the first step in addressing any destructive behavior. To make things easier for yourself, remove valuable objects from your dog's reach and provide your puppy with interesting chew toys instead. You can bring back valuable items once your dog is older.

Every time an owner sees their dog chewing on something inappropriate, they should say "No", take away the object, and replace it with a suitable chew toy.

If the owner notices the dog approaching an inappropriate object for chewing, they should redirect it to an item meant for chewing. It's important to understand that it takes time for a dog to learn what is and isn't allowed. Consistency is crucial—if constant supervision isn't possible, the dog should be kept in a restricted area, such as a crate or a playpen.

In practice, those who believed "Oh, he won't do that" often ended up regretting it. A dog doesn't know which specific pair of slippers you allowed it to chew on—if not stopped, it will chew any slippers it finds later.

To prevent and satisfy the need for chewing, chew toys should not always be available, as they may become boring. If a toy is always accessible, your dog will ignore it and instead seek your attention—perhaps by pulling your slippers off your feet! (Urošević, Marjanović, 2019)^[4].



(Photo: Urošević, 2021.)

Picture 3: Dogs with Interactive toy

Interactive Toys

To prevent destructive chewing, it is essential to enrich the dog's living space with interactive toys.

From the moment a dog arrives in your home, its primary interaction is with its food bowl, from which it receives meals. In the first months, this happens four times a day, then three times, and eventually twice a day. Throughout this time, the dog receives its meals without having to do anything for them. Perhaps it sits and waits briefly, but ultimately, it gets the full meal effortlessly. The dog has never had to engage in any special activity to satisfy one of its primary instincts—survival. (Linda, 2014)^[3]

To make feeding more engaging and to satisfy the dog's chewing and licking needs, it is important to provide a challenge—allowing the dog to obtain food through chewing on a toy.

The two best interactive toys for this purpose are the Kong and Crocodile Teeth chew toy.



(Photo: Urošević, 2021.)

Picture 4: Dog Nala Surrounded by Interactive Toys

Crocodile Teeth

A rugby ball-shaped toy with small ridges designed to hold kibble or your dog's meal between the grooves. It consists of three sections of ridges, creating a challenge for the dog as it works to get its food.

When introducing your dog to this toy, start by placing kibble in the first and second rows to spark interest and help the dog learn how to use it. If you immediately place the kibble deep inside at the hardest level, the dog may become frustrated and give up on the toy.



(Photo: Urošević, 2022.)

Picture 5: Rugby Ball Toy with Ridges

Kong

A highly popular and multifunctional toy and feeder that also promotes proper jaw development in young dogs. This wobbler is designed to be filled with food, and the dog must chew, lick, and roll it around to get the food out. Some dogs stay engaged with it for up to an hour.

Filling the Kong is simple, and cleaning is even easier. The first step is to put dry kibble inside so the dog can roll it around and let the food fall out. This teaches the dog that food comes from the toy and prepares it for more challenging fillings.

For an added challenge, you can soak kibble in water (2 tablespoons) until it expands, then place it inside. This makes the dog work even harder to retrieve it, encouraging more chewing—which is the toy's main purpose.

During summer months, you can prepare the Kong in advance, freeze it, and give it to your dog as a cooling treat that serves as both a meal and a way to cool down.



(Photo: Urošević, 2019.)

Picture 6: Kong

Buoy (Wobbler)

This toy resembles the Kong but serves a different purpose. Unlike chew toys, the buoy is designed to enhance motor skills by rewarding the dog with kibble when it pushes and tilts the toy side to side.

Dogs use their paws to tip the toy while also thinking strategically about how to move it to release kibble more quickly.

This toy is only meant for dry kibble. When introducing it for the first time, owners may need to demonstrate by tilting it left and right to encourage the dog to interact with it.



(Photo: Urošević, 2019.)

Picture 7: Wobbler Toy

Chew Treats

Chew treats are essential for preventing and reducing destructive chewing. They are widely available in pet stores and include pressed bones, dried ears, and tendons. These edible chews keep your dog engaged and satisfy its natural chewing instinct, effectively preventing destructive chewing behaviors.



(Photo: Urošević, 2022.)

Picture 8: Chew Treats

Digging into Furniture

Many dog owners have likely noticed that their dogs have strange bedtime rituals, such as spinning in circles multiple times before lying down or snuggling up against their favorite blanket. Some puppies may even scratch at their bed before lying down, while others might tear it apart from excessive scratching.



(Photo: Urošević, 2021.)

Picture 9: Protecting Furniture from Scratching

To owners, this may seem like destructive behavior, but for dogs, it's completely natural. The main reason almost every dog digs at its bed is an instinctual drive to create a comfortable and warm resting spot. This behavior is deeply embedded in their genes.

One of the most important survival skills of wild dogs was learning how to make a shelter. The behavior of domestic dogs often reflects this ancestral instinct. Digging became a way for dogs living in cold or damp climates to protect themselves from the elements.



(Photo: Urošević, 2021.)

Picture 10: Protecting Furniture from Scratching

They would dig shallow holes in the ground to keep warm or make a hard surface more comfortable by creating a nest out of leaves and dirt. (Shojai, 2019.)

The only way to reduce this behavior is to minimize its impact by:

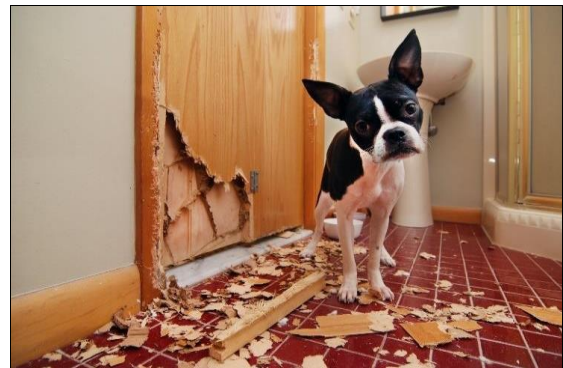
- Trimming the dog's nails regularly

- Providing durable dog beds

- Placing a blanket on furniture in time if the dog starts digging into the couch.

Destruction Due to Behavioral Disorders

A problem that is increasingly common in dogs. This behavior manifests as scratched doors when left alone, barking, urinating indoors, destruction of frequently used objects, and in some cases, even self-harm. This is actually a symptom of separation anxiety.



Picture 11. Destroyed Doors After the Owner's Return Home
(<https://www.meadowlakepetresort.com/blog/summertime-sadness-easing-separation-anxiety-in-your-dog/>)

The word anxiety means an irrational fear. Separation means detachment. Separation anxiety is a behavioral disorder characterized by restlessness and strong emotional reactions when a dog is left alone or separated from the person or family with whom it has a strong bond. The severity of separation anxiety can range from mild to extreme, causing significant emotional distress for both the dog and its family. It can occur in dogs of any breed and age. (Hallgren, 2012)^[1]

Dogs are naturally social animals and dislike being alone. Many dogs living in a stable environment never develop separation anxiety, even when their owners leave for work daily. However, for some dogs, triggers such as sudden routine changes, stress (moving, childbirth, loss of a family member), or past negative experiences when left alone (e.g., a loud, frightening noise) can contribute to the development of separation anxiety. In most cases, owners unintentionally trigger separation anxiety by allowing their dogs to sleep in their bed from the beginning.

Common Signs of Separation Anxiety

- The dog follows the owner everywhere (bathroom, kitchen, living room).

- The dog sleeps at the owner's feet or next to them.

- If left alone, the dog barks non-stop.

- The dog may urinate inside near the owner's frequently used spots (bed, couch) or places where it was previously punished.

- The dog scratches doors or destroys furniture when alone.

Separation anxiety is more likely in:

Dogs that were rarely left alone in the past.

Dogs that experienced abandonment at a young age.

Puppies separated from their mother too early (before 8 weeks) or too late (after 14 weeks).

Dogs that had negative experiences in shelters or were abandoned.

Dogs that have formed a strong attachment to one person and lack independence.

Senior dogs or dogs with health issues.

A common mistake is that owners constantly carry their puppy during its first month, leading the dog to see this as normal behavior. Another mistake is making a big deal out of arrivals and departures. Instead, owners should give the dog a chew toy when leaving and ignore excited greetings upon returning.

Specificity of the Problem – Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety requires a completely different approach and the application of various techniques to achieve results. Each case is unique, meaning no universal solution exists.

The only way to modify behavior successfully is by staying calm, patient, and confident. How an owner approaches the problem directly affects the outcome. It is crucial that the owner works with the dog, not a third party.

Many owners become so frustrated with their dog's behavior that they can't handle the pressure. However, yelling or punishing the dog for urinating indoors, chewing shoes, or causing destruction will not improve the situation. The dog already feels bad—its only comfort is the owner's return. If this return is accompanied by anger and punishment, the dog will begin to live in fear at all times, not just when alone. This creates an additional behavioral issue.

Since this problem takes time to resolve, owners must be patient. Some may see progress in just a week, while others may need longer.

Tactic 1 – “Hawk Eye”

The dog must learn that its owner always returns. The best way to achieve this is by using a small surveillance camera and special treats. Some dogs experience such extreme stress that they refuse to eat—this is normal. In these cases, the tactic should focus on touch (petting) as a reward instead of food.

A surveillance camera should be positioned to capture the entire room where the dog stays. All doors leading to other rooms should be closed, and any areas where the owner lacks visibility should be blocked off.



Picture 12: Camera illustration

(<https://www.amazon.com/VINSON-Camera%EF%BC%8CDog-Camera-Monitor-Indoor/dp/B07M7DW3TW>)

Steps:

Prepare special treats and keep them in your pocket.

Turn on camera streaming on your phone and leave the house.

Walk far enough that your dog can't hear or smell you.

Monitor the dog's behavior via the camera.

If the dog stays calm, return home.

Ignore jumping and barking upon return—reward only calm behavior.

If the dog enters a panic state (whining, barking, scratching the door), first desensitize it to the exit process. This is done by frequent exits and returns, making it too exhausting for the dog to keep reacting.

Even the most anxious dogs have moments of silence—wait for at least 10 seconds of calm before re-entering. Do not acknowledge the dog immediately. Once it has fully calmed down, give it a treat or a gentle pet.

This technique is called “memory association training”—it aims to replace the dog's negative experience of being alone with a positive one.

Separation anxiety training takes time, but the results are worth the effort. Dogs are emotional beings, and overcoming their fears requires patience, consistency, and understanding.

Tactic 2 – “Positive Scent Association”

For this step, owners need a worn T-shirt, sock, or another piece of clothing that carries their scent. Dogs explore the world through smell, making this a powerful calming tool.

Many dogs love sleeping on their owner's shoes, slippers, or laundry—this simple method can provide emotional comfort when they are alone.

This step should be combined with Tactic 1 to observe how the dog reacts to the scent.



(Photo: Urošević, 2016.)

Picture 13: Sleeping on the Owner's Item

Tactic 3 – “Your Voice”

In addition to scent association, owners can introduce their voice. Some people leave the TV or radio on, but a more effective approach is recording the owner's actual voice.



Picture 14. Dog Listening to the Radio
(<https://depositphotos.com/stock-photos/dog-listening-music.html>)

Remember, this process is about helping the dog overcome its deepest fears. The goal is small daily improvements rather than an instant cure.

Tactic 4 – Desensitization

Certain owner behaviors often become a conditioned reflex for the dog, signaling that it's time to go out—triggering panic and destructive behavior. To eliminate this response, the owner must begin desensitizing these routines from the start.

Common triggers for dogs include putting on sneakers, heels, or shoes, grabbing a bag or jacket, the sound of keys, or unlocking the door. All these sounds must become irrelevant.

One way to make a routine less significant is for the owner to put on shoes but instead of leaving, lift their feet onto the table and start reading a book or walk to the kitchen. The goal is to break the usual pattern by frequently changing actions.

This process should be repeated with all potential triggers the dog reacts to in the home.

Tactic 5 – "The Hug"

This step focuses on providing the dog with a sense of security when the owner is not home. These are additional tools designed to make the process easier.

One method is wrapping the dog using the Tellington TTouch technique to simulate a hug. This method does not work for every dog, but for some, it can be very effective.



Picture 15: Wrapping and Hug Simulation
(www.tunmall.com/?category_id=7814229)

A plush dog—a stuffed toy shaped like a dog—can also be used, with a clock placed inside to simulate a heartbeat for the dog.

To increase the chances of success, the owner can place the plush toy under their pillow overnight to absorb their scent before offering it to the dog.

Tactic 6 – "Additional Enrichment"

Providing interactive toys at the moment the owner leaves the house. As previously mentioned, dogs are natural chewers, and chewing helps them calm down.

In addition to interactive toys, owners can also give chew treats, which can be hidden around the house. This way, the dog will engage its sense of smell while exploring and discovering hidden treats.

Additional Suggestions

In addition to training-based methods for managing separation anxiety, there are several other options that dog owners should be aware of. These are serious steps, but each provides a solution beyond training alone. It is important to emphasize that these are additional options that owners can combine with previously mentioned techniques.

Option 1 – Dog Daycare

Dog daycare is an alternative solution that can help owners teach their dogs that it is normal to spend time away from them.

When enrolling a dog in daycare, the staff should be informed about the dog's behavioral issues to ensure that it is not immediately exposed to more active dogs upon arrival.



Picture 16: Photo from Puppy School (Photo: Urošević, 2021.)

First, the dog should be introduced to calmer or older dogs to help it adjust to the new environment and relax. Separation can be highly stressful for dogs, causing them to freeze or hide in a corner. Do not force the dog—allow it to gradually step out of its comfort zone.

If there is a well-trained dog available, you can ask for the anxious dog to lie next to it, as this may help it feel more secure and relaxed.

Option 2 – A Second Dog

It may seem counterintuitive to suggest getting another pet when the one you already have requires extra care and attention. However, in some cases, a second dog can be the solution for a pet that hates being alone**.



(Photo: Urošević, 2021.)

Picture 17: Paired Walk with Two Dogs

Option 3 – Medication

There are very few cases where anxiety medication would be recommended for a dog, as medication does not solve the problem—it only masks it while it is active. However, it is a last resort worth considering if a dog's anxiety is so severe that it risks self-harm. In such cases, consult a veterinarian about potential medications that could help calm the dog's nerves and make training easier.

Any use of anti-anxiety medication should always be paired with training. The goal is to solve the problem, and the only way to truly achieve that is through working with the dog.

Before considering medication, natural remedies such as valerian-based supplements may be a good alternative, as they also have a calming effect. (Urošević, Marjanović, 2019)^[4]

Unconventional Methods

In addition to all the previously mentioned techniques, alternative approaches such as Reiki and homeopathy for dogs should not be overlooked. These methods can be highly beneficial in managing anxiety-related issues.

Reiki helps reduce stress, promote relaxation, and restore balance in the body, encouraging the healing process.



(Photo: MN Obuka Pasa & Edukacija Vlasnika, 2021.)

Picture 18: Completed Reiki Session with Trainer Marija Marjanović

Conclusion

We live in a time of rapid change. Twenty years ago, it was unimaginable for every other household to have a dog in an apartment or house, especially in Belgrade. Back then, dogs were considered suitable for yards, guarding livestock, properties, and warehouses.

Today, things are completely different. More and more families own small or large dogs. These dogs no longer live outside, nor is their job to guard. A dog has become a family member. Dogs are living beings that feel pain, suffering, fear, and stress. When a dog enters our home, we gain a companion, a friend, and a new family member.

With the expansion of household dogs, many problems have emerged—problems that previously did not exist because dogs in yards naturally satisfied their chewing instincts on wood or bones. Now, if we give a dog a piece of wood to chew on, we are actually creating a problem. In an apartment, our furniture is largely made of wood. Dogs do not distinguish the purpose of an object but do recognize textures. If they bite wood after being given wooden objects before, they are more likely to continue chewing on table legs or wooden chairs.

The solution to this problem lies in educating dog owners. Only a well-informed owner will know how to enrich their dog's living space and satisfy its chewing needs properly.

The belief that dogs can be dominant over their owners and that humans must establish themselves as pack leaders shows a lack of education. Humans and dogs are two completely different species—what matters to humans does not matter to dogs, so dominance cannot exist in such a relationship. A dog does not want to take our credit cards and shop online, nor do we want to chew on its bone.

Beyond theoretical knowledge, it is essential for owners to go through basic dog training to engage their dog mentally. Basic commands such as sit, down, come, heel, place, as well as tricks, not only stimulate and enrich the dog's life but also enhance the owner's experience.

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