

### What is happening when my dog reacts?

“My dog is always lunging at people/dogs/bikes.” For the majority of dogs, reactive behaviour is displayed as lunging, barking, and growling and we often think of these behaviours as being the problem.

It is important to keep in mind that these reactive behaviours are symptoms. The root of the problem is what is happening emotionally that is bringing out these reactions in Fido. What is driving these behaviours? Why is he feeling the need to put on this big show to keep things away or, conversely, have something come to him? We want to understand the emotions that are driving the behaviour versus wondering how to stop the dog from exhibiting this behaviour.

When stress occurs, it shuts down cognitive ability. This limits how dogs are able to think and act. The effects of a reaction change the chemical composition in the dog as a shot of adrenaline shoots through the body. Cortisol hormones are also flooding the body to ignite the required flight or fight response in that moment. Normally, Fido is able to think and eat, but when stress occurs Fido goes into survival mode and his energy is redirected to support his survival response. Without time for Fido to decompress from a reaction, he is not going to be in a position where he can work and learn. His body is flooded with stress. It takes 72 hours for a dog's adrenaline levels to return to normal. What could happen if a dog is put in another situation where he felt the need to react even though his adrenaline levels hadn't dropped from the previous situation?

There are always two questions to ask about Fido at any given time:

1. Can he eat?
2. Can he think?

If he is not interested in food he is likely to have some cognitive impairment. His brain is not processing the situation clearly and emotions start to take hold. Ask these questions frequently when on walks or in new situations.

### What causes reactivity?

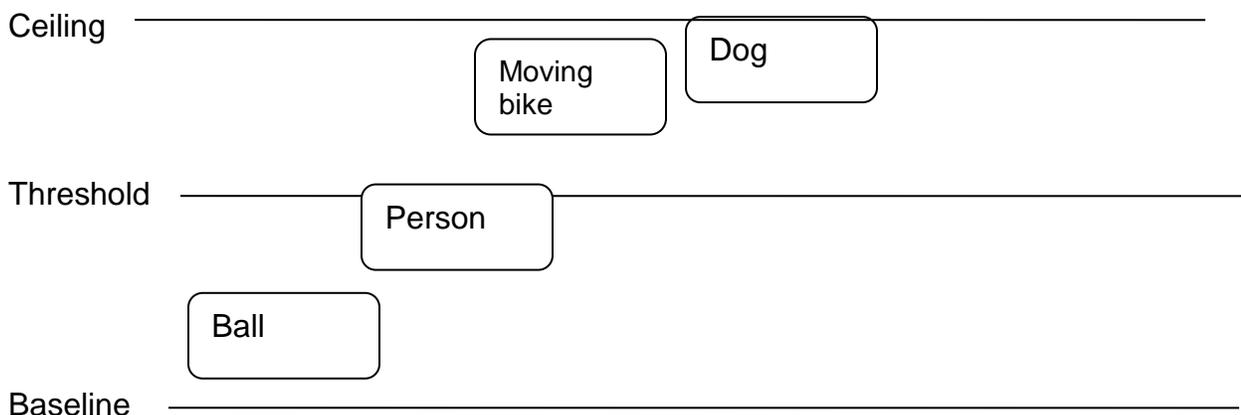
Typically, reactivity comes from one of two places: fear or frustration. Regardless of whether reactivity is fear- or frustration-based, both can generate big emotions in a dog.

### Experiences:

When puppies are in their socialization period – the first four months of their life - they can have bad experiences, good experiences, and neutral experiences. Most experiences during a puppy’s development are neutral (rather than positive or negative) and they may grow up not knowing if an experience is okay or not okay. Neutral and negative experiences that were not perceived by the puppy to be positive can cause fear or frustration later on in life.

### **Where do I start and what can I do?**

Try to remove yourself and your dog from the situation. If Fido is below his threshold (refer to figure below) then he is in a place where his brain is functioning. He can think, learn, process, and begin to create coping skills to help him through these types of emotions and move forward.



The graph depicts different types of stimuli, which can bring on different types of arousal. Fido really likes his ball and that ball will create a bit of arousal. It won't bring on so much arousal that he completely loses his ability to think or focus. He will be slightly above baseline but well below threshold.

Seeing another person or another dog is a higher arousal trigger. Depending on your dog, Fido may hit that ceiling right away.

When stress hormones are present in the body, all stimuli get stacked on top of each other, causing a reaction. All of this stimulation, also known as Fido's triggers, may mean he is more likely to hit that ceiling. This is why a bad interaction with dog/bike/person makes it feel like the rest of the walk is worse than usual. That initial trigger was so strong that there is no room

for him to work through the other stimuli that appears. It's the same as losing a game of Tetris; the blocks just keep building up until the game is over.

Understanding Fido's triggers is helpful in order to set up Fido's environment for success. Pay attention to what you see him either react to, get tense with, or lose focus around. Think about how you can build a world where the environment is less intense for him.

As a guardian of a dog who is reactive, anxious, or fearful it is important to act as his protector and to design his environment so that he is not being triggered by it. Think about when you are most commonly going to see the triggers that are hard for him and manipulate the environment by making sure you are not heading out for a walk during those times. If Fido struggles with kids on bikes, mid-afternoon is not the best time to go for a walk. Go out at a time of day when his triggers are less likely to occur. Consider where there are areas that have the triggers that he struggles with the most. How can you position yourself so these triggers aren't as intense? Maybe you can drive to an area that doesn't have the same level of triggers for your walk. Parks with open areas and space may be a suitable choice as triggers may not be as close to Fido during your walk. Dogs that struggle with vehicles passing by should not be walked on a sidewalk with the trigger close at hand. A field would be a better choice where automobiles are further away, lowering the intensity of the trigger.

You can do some things to calm your home environment too. If Fido is particularly wild or reactive in the house, create a calm home environment that gives him a place to release those stress hormones and decompress. Adding privacy film to front windows can be useful if passersby, birds, or other things outside are going by agitate Fido. Using adaptil calming pheromones and playing calming music are some other options. Music with environmental sounds can be also calming and muffle outside sounds that Fido may be bothered by.

Focus on creating quality experiences for Fido. Fido needs to build confidence in these situations. No matter where that emotion is coming from, a big part of it is that he is lacking some confidence or he is experiencing reactivity because of his frustration with the world. Imagine him saying, "I just want to do all the things and I can't because I'm attached to this leash!"

Self-control is important but confidence is critical for Fido in dealing with his emotions. Being able to confidently move through emotions successfully is a win. Creating quality experiences to help him think, "I did it! I saw a dog three blocks away and I was totally okay!" The next time he sees a dog three blocks away he will realize, "I can do this. I have confidence in myself."

Create positive experiences by building associations. Fido's triggers should mean really good things for him. You want to have a reliable pattern where triggers predict good things are going to come from us. Be proactive. As soon as Fido notices the other dog, spring into action. Don't wait for Fido to react. "Who wants their dinner?" And it becomes food! Food! Food! Redirecting their focus from the trigger is a really great thing to do.

A good practice and habit to get into is *ditching the bowl*. When taking Fido out in a world where he is overwhelmed, redistribute his entire meal and put it into those situations. With this, we are teaching food motivation. Remember, Fido is less likely to want to eat when stressed. Get Fido into the groove of being able to eat in stressful situations. If you have Fido's entire meal versus a handful of treats, it's going to make a bigger impact. It's the giant quantity of food that is going to make sure your dog is experiencing many repetitions of good things happening while on their walk.

You have turned the world upside down all of a sudden. Now walking is a positive experience for Fido. That sheer quantity of rewarding food they'll enjoy while walking will make a big difference. When bringing his food on a walk he is being rewarded more frequently and this is much more motivating for him.

In summary, your dog's reactivity is a result of stress caused by fear of something or frustration with something. Learning which triggers cause your dog to react and then distancing your dog from those triggers and counterconditioning with food will start to build good experiences, confidence, and coping strategies when out on a walk.