

UNDERSTANDING REACTIVITY

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?

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.

Seeing another person or another dog is a higher arousal trigger. Depending on your dog, Fido may hit the ceiling right away. ***Punishment or corrections (in the form of jerking the leash, choking the dog by pulling back, holding the dog's mouth closed, scolding him, or harsh loud “No”, etc.) when reactivity occurs is counter productive and, in most cases, will make things worse.***

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.

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. Food! Food! Food! Redirecting their focus from the trigger is a really great thing to do.

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.