



What is Reactivity?

Reactive behaviour is most often displayed as lunging, barking, and/or growling in response to a trigger. Triggers can be everyday occurrences like bikes, other dogs, kids, or strangers.

Why is my dog showing reactive behaviour?

We often think that the behaviour displayed by a reactive dog is the problem however, it is important to remember that this behaviour is only a symptom of the core problem.

Reactivity is, at its core, caused by an emotional response to a trigger. That emotion is most often fear, but for some dogs it can be an intense level of frustration.

Once a dog reacts to a trigger they will often go over threshold, causing them to lose some of their cognitive processing skills, and limiting their ability to think and react appropriately. This is the point at which we often see dogs lose interest in food.

The stress level created by a reaction also creates a corresponding spike in cortisol and adrenaline causing the dog to act in survival mode.

Dogs need ample time to decompress after a reaction as this hormonal spike can take up to 72 hours to return to baseline. This is why a walk may seem to go worse than usual after your dog has encountered a trigger, and why encountering multiple triggers over a relatively short time frame may result in each reaction being worse than the last.

We do not always know what is causing reactivity for a specific dog, be it fear or frustration, but regardless, we can help the dog navigate their environment in a better way.

How can I help my dog work through their reactivity?

Understand your dog's triggers

Understanding your dog's triggers will help you navigate the environment in a way that sets your dog up to succeed. Observe your dog for any sign of stress or reactivity. You may see them get tense, fixate on a trigger, refuse food, or react. Keep note of what is triggering those reactions.

Manage your dog's environment

Once you have identified your dog's triggers work on managing their environment in a way that brings down the intensity of those triggers. There are many ways to do this:

- Walk at a time of day when less triggers are present
- Use cars, trees, or fences to visually block triggers
- Create more distance between your dog and the trigger
- Plan your walks in less trafficked areas

Managing your dog's environment is key to reducing reactivity, remember that once your dog reacts they often lose key cognitive processing skills and are no longer able to make good decisions. At that point training protocols are much less likely to be effective.

Create positive associations with triggers

Since reactivity is built on fear or frustration the most effective tactics to improve your dog's reactivity rely on changing your dog's underlying feelings about the trigger.

- Create a consistent pattern where your dog learns that the presence of a trigger is a predictor for a reward
- Be proactive, as soon as your dog notices a trigger respond quickly by offering him a treat. Redirect his attention away from the trigger using treats. Do not wait for your dog to react. If your dog is unwilling to take food, try again later but with a greater distance between your dog and the trigger
- Punishment or corrections (i.e. jerking the leash, holding the dog's mouth shut, yelling or scolding) when reactivity occurs is counter productive and, in most cases, will make things worse as it actually reinforces the negative associations that your dog already holds towards a trigger.

Focus on building confidence

Dogs with reactivity will almost always benefit from increased confidence. Creating good experiences for them in which they can start to slowly build up confidence to be around triggers without reacting will help decrease their fear surrounding triggers and improve their overall behaviour.

If you are struggling with your dog's behaviour you can always call our free behaviour helpline at 403-723-6019, or go to [CalgaryHumane.ca](https://calgaryhumane.ca) to book a consultation or join one of our behaviour classes