

REACTIVITY OR OVER-REACTION?

So what do we mean when we talk about reactivity?

The dictionary definition of "react" is "to respond to a stimulus in a particular manner", which is pretty bland but it does tell us that reacting is not in itself a bad thing. Every animal reacts sometimes and some reaction is needed for survival!

When we talk about "reactive" dogs we are talking about an over-reaction – a dog who responds to something with more intensity than we'd expect in that situation.

Context is key. Growling or barking at another dog from a few hundred feet away is an over-reaction. Growling if another dog jumps on their back is not!

So we define reactivity as "over-reacting to a dog, human or something else in the environment by barking, lunging, growling or otherwise responding with higher than expected intensity". Note for your dog this might also include "flight" so backing off and freezing can also be over-reactive responses.

Remember your dog is not being naughty or disobedient. Your dog is not being difficult. Your dog is just responding in a way that works for them in that moment.

So your job is to let them know they can respond to things in a different way. And we are going to show you how!



WHAT CAUSES REACTIVITY?

So what causes reactivity? What makes one dog over-react when another dog doesn't?

Over-reaction is usually driven by an emotional response to something in the environment. Your dog may be frightened, frustrated or over-excited – and sometimes it is hard to tell the difference. The good news is you can work from what you see even if you are not sure exactly how your dog is feeling. But you always need to remember that they are FEELING something and you want to change that feeling as well as how your dog behaves. Anything else is simply suppressing the behaviour.

Over-reaction can happen because of a single traumatic event. Your dog's brain stores traumatic memories in a way that makes them quicker to recall – so even one experience can be enough to create an ongoing reactive response.

It can also happen if your dog has repeated negative experiences. Maybe they were fine after the first time another dog had a go at them, but when it happens two or three times more, they start to react to all dogs.

But there are other things you also need to think about...



Pain is first on the list. When you are sore or uncomfortable, your behaviour changes right? You are more sensitive to other people or perhaps less tolerant or patient than usual? You might feel protective of yourself and not want to risk anyone brushing against the part of you that is sore. Your dog is no different!

So make sure you get your dog checked thoroughly for pain and illness, especially if you see a sudden change in them. Look at muscular-skeletal pain, gut pain and illness and remember that temporary pain or discomfort can influence your dog too.

Genetics are another factor. There are studies that show that fear of specific things can be passed down through several generations. Your dog might react to something because their mum or their grandparent did! Of course you can't change this but knowing it can be reassuring especially when you think you must have done something wrong for your dog to be like this!

And remember that sometimes you won't be able to pinpoint a specific incident or cause. Your dog has been raised just like your previous dogs and none of them were over reactive. This can be frustrating for sure but don't worry! The good news is you don't need to know the cause to be able to change your dog's reaction.



WHY REACTIVITY IS HARD FOR US

Reactivity is one of the hardest behaviours to deal with but have you ever wondered why that is? You may never have even thought about reactivity before you got this dog, but now when your dog starts reacting, you find yourself reacting too! You may get stressed at the very thought of going for a walk. Your hands may tighten on the lead when you spot another dog.

But have you ever thought about why it is so hard?

Are you worried about what your dog might do? Do you ask - what if they hurt another dog? What if they hurt a person? What if someone gets in the way and gets hurt by accident?

And what would happen then? What might happen if something does go wrong? Do you worry that your dog might be taken away and that you might get prosecuted? Those are nightmare scenarios – no wonder it feels hard.

But even if you are sure your dog will not do actual harm you can still be embarrassed by how your dog carries on. Reactivity is often a very public, very noisy behaviour - it is hard to hide! And when you are cringing whenever you set foot out of the house with your dog, it is not surprising it is difficult.



There are other reasons you may not have thought of. You got your dog for a reason. Maybe you wanted to be able to go on long walks with your friends. Maybe you wanted to compete in a sport. Maybe you wanted to go to pubs and cafes and take your dog everywhere with you. Maybe you have a family and got your dog to be a companion for your children. When the dog you have and love does not fit in with the dreams you had then it can be very disappointing. You often go through a grieving process.

It is important to acknowledge how your dog's behaviour affects you and be kind to yourself. It is not your fault AND it is normal to feel any or all of these things.

But you can also turn this on its head. Your reactive dog may be challenging but they will teach you far more than an easy-going dog. You will learn about yourself and more about how you react to situations and more about dogs from this dog than from any other.

And the bond you will build with this dog will be so much stronger as a result!

So celebrate yourself and your dog right now! You are a team and you are making progress just by being here!



BOTH ENDS OF THE LEASH

When you think about reactivity, do you focus on just your dog? Do you focus on how to stop the behaviour you don't like? If so take a step back. Remember that your dog is not a problem dog, they are a dog with a problem. And how you behave can make a big difference to how they behave.

So the human end of the leash is just as important as your dog's end and both need your attention! Does that mean that your dog's reactivity is your fault? Absolutely not! But it does mean that your responses, your mindset, your expectations and your confidence will make a big difference to your success in helping your dog.

Let's look at a simple example. If you think that your reactive dog is misbehaving, then you will be embarrassed by their behaviour and you will focus on stopping them "acting up". But if you recognise that they are frightened, you will see their behaviour as information and you will use that to help them be more comfortable. Very different responses to the same situation - and the second one is going to be much more effective in the long term.

So you need to be willing to think differently about your dog and your life together so that you can change how you behave as well as working on your dog's behaviour. And when you do that your whole relationship with your dog changes for the better!



When you understand that you need to change alongside your dog, you set yourself up for success and living with your dog becomes fun and joyful again. Reactivity is a long game - there are no quick fixes - so it is really important that you can live happily with your dog's reactivity while you work on resolving it.

Taking a "both ends of the leash" approach lets you do just that!

THE THREE STEPS OF BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Reactivity happens for a reason. It gives your dog something that they need in that moment.

Maybe their reactive behaviour stopped a hand from touching them. Maybe it made another dog go away. Or maybe it kept a person from coming closer to them.

Sometimes, the reason for the behaviour is obvious and sometimes it's not. But there is always a reason.

As you work towards changing your dog's behaviour, you need to understand what their reactive behaviour gives them and find an alternative way to meet that need. Is it space? Is it a sense of safety? How else can you give them that?

There are three fundamental steps to changing behaviour.

First, manage the environment as much as you can so your dog feels safe and can be successful. Sometimes you can prevent unwanted behaviour completely, simply by changing the environment so that your dog finds it easier to do what you'd like them to instead.

Second, learn to recognise changes in your dog's body language that indicate they are getting stressed. You can then support or encourage them to do behaviours that are alternative to reacting.

Third, reinforce and always support your dog when they are successful. This will make sure the new behaviours are more desirable to your dog than overreacting. The more success they have, the more likely they will choose these behaviours in the future.

Remember to follow these three steps and you and your dog will be on the right track.



WHAT COMES BEFORE BEHAVIOUR

Understanding what happens before your dog reacts is very important if you are going to resolve their reactivity.

There is always something that prompts behaviour. Think carefully about the situation you found yourself in. What was happening just before your dog started to over-react?

Sometimes we focus only on the obvious triggers, such as a dog appearing or a person getting closer. But in reality the thing which immediately comes before the reaction is often more subtle. Look for things like a hand getting too close, tension in the lead, or changes in position of your body in relation to theirs.

Once you understand exactly what comes before your dog's reaction, you can manage the environment and adjust how you behave to make it easier for them to act calmly and feel safe in the world around them.



BEHAVIOUR IS ALWAYS HAPPENING

When you think about changing behaviour, often you just want something to stop. For example you might want to stop your dog barking when visitors arrive. But this doesn't teach your dog what to actually do in that situation. Dogs are always doing something, so you need to think about what you actively want them to do instead.

The best options to choose are activities that make the unwanted behaviour impossible to do at the same time.

If your dog jumps up, you can teach them to sit.

If your dog barks, you can teach them to do something else with their mouth, like carrying a toy - after all they can't do both at once!

You will also want to think about what your dog needs in that moment. Do they feel safe? Teaching them to move to a safe space when someone arrives might be all that they need.

The more effort you put into selecting alternative behaviours for your dog that are enjoyable for them and fulfil their needs, the more successful your training plan will be.



OUTCOMES OF BEHAVIOUR

Consequences drive behaviour. We repeat things that have good outcomes and stop doing those that don't. Imagine you touch a hot stove and get burned... Will this make you more or less likely to touch it again? If you visit a store and they give you free samples, then are you more or less likely to go there again?

All living beings are programmed to avoid negative experiences and seek out positive ones.

This means that the consequences of your dog's actions are really important in shaping their future behaviour.

So if you want to make it more likely that your dog will behave in a certain way, you will need to make sure that the outcome is something they want or love.

For example your dog might be more likely to behave calmly around other dogs, if in the past this has resulted in them getting their favourite treats from you, having the opportunity to explore and sniff or simply being given the chance to make their own choice to move away if they want to.

Always remember to think about how your dog might feel in the moment too - simply doing a behaviour doesn't ensure they are enjoying it. Always look at their body language and adjust course if you see your dog struggling.



TRIGGERS AND TRIGGER STACKING

A trigger is anything that is actually present in the environment or in a memory of the environment that initiates a physical response or a reaction.

You will be all too familiar with your dog's primary triggers. These are what your dog reacts to - the other dog, the stranger, the fast moving vehicle.

Of course it is not always as simple as that. Your dog might not react to all dogs but may be selective according to colour, breed, size, how busy they are or how close they are.

And there are other less obvious things that can be secondary triggers for your dog. These are things that make your dog more likely to react. There are lots of these but things to think about include location, weather, how you are feeling, who you are walking with, what your dog has done recently and how well your dog feels.

Triggers are cumulative so it is the combination of these factors which create the specific context that will determine whether or not your dog will react. We call this trigger stacking and it can make your dog's behaviour feel unpredictable.

Sometimes they will react to a dog, another time they won't, so how do you know?

You need to know what factors are primary or secondary triggers for your dog. Keeping a diary can help with this. If your dog reacts, note down everything you can about the situation. Where? How far away? What kind of dog? Time of day? Weather? Anything unusual happening?

The more you can learn about your dog's responses the easier you will be able to predict what they will react to and therefore keep them in the Green Zone.



STRESS RESPONSES: THE FOUR 'F'S

Your dog may show one or more of four typical responses to stress, known as the four Fs.

The first is Fight, where your dog barks, growls, lunges or bites. It does not have to be actual fighting but includes any active response intended to move another dog or person away.

The second is Flight, where your dog tries to avoid a situation. They may look away, hide, try to move away or flee a situation. If your dog can't escape when they need to, their Flight response can turn into Fight.

The third is Freeze, where your dog stops moving or responding. This is sometimes misread as calmness, because the dog is not reacting, but a dog in Freeze will have fixed body language and is unlikely to be able to take food.

The final F is Fool Around, where your dog plays the fool. Your dog may lower their body and put their ears back. They may wiggle a lot and wag their tail rapidly. This can be misinterpreted as friendliness but they are actually concerned.

Look at how your dog responds when they're stressed and if you see any of these behaviours proactively take steps to reduce the stress that they're feeling.



BEHAVIOURAL RESPONSES

Behavioural responses are the things that your dog does in response to things that happen to them or that occur in the environment. This can be many things from subtle movements to bites!

Notice if your dog suddenly seems distracted by something, especially if it has been in the environment for a while. What happened just before this? They might actually be a little concerned by a change in the environment.

Watch if your dog leans away from touch or moves an area of their body away from you. This can be subtle like sitting down when you touch the back or more obvious like rolling on their back.

These can be signs that your dog is not comfortable with what is happening. So it is another clue for you to note. Does this happen every time you touch them or approach in this way? Does it happen in other situations?

You will always notice responses like growling, mouthing or biting but you can often avoid these altogether by noticing the more subtle signs of concern.



TRAFFIC LIGHTS FOR MANAGING DISTANCE

You can use a traffic light system to help you decide when your dog needs more space in any situation.

Green is when your dog can watch a trigger with mild interest without showing concern. Your dog is comfortable and you don't have to do anything to support them.

Amber is when your dog shows some signs of arousal or avoidance. Look for changes in their body language. This is a critical point that can easily turn to red without action. You can support your dog by moving them further away or giving them a calming activity to do until they are back in Green.

Red is when your dog is actively reacting by barking, growling or lunging. You need to move your dog away from the trigger urgently and help them de-escalate.

Your aim is to keep your dog between Green and Amber. Here they are able to learn and make choices.

Sometimes you will find that your dog moves quickly into Red. If your dog struggles no matter the distance you will need to manage exposure to their triggers very carefully. Work on helping your dog to reset and lowering their overall arousal level as well as setting achievable goals.

The distance that your dog needs will vary depending on the trigger. Your dog's body language will tell you if they are in the Green, Amber or Red zone. Watch carefully and take action to keep your dog in Green as much as possible.



HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

A common question is how long will it take for my dog to stop overreacting? As with many things, the answer is, "it depends."

Individual genetics, breed characteristics, and your dog's personal history all have an influence on your dog's behaviour as does the length of time they have been overreacting.

If your dog has been reacting to their triggers for months or even years, expecting an overnight change is unrealistic. Healthy, long-lasting behaviour change usually takes time, so having attainable goals is important.

Other key factors in determining how long things will take include how effectively you are able to manage your dog's exposure to triggers, whether you can address other issues such as pain or illness and how frequently you practise alternative behaviours.

Remember it's not always possible to remove over-reactivity completely. Sometimes there are factors beyond your control and it's important to celebrate your dog and your successes as a team along the way.

There may not be an exact answer as to how long it might take to see progress, but your dedication will make a huge difference to your dog. When you manage your dog's environment, give them plenty of chances to practice desirable behaviours and allow them the time and space they need, you will see progress sooner rather than later.

