

# THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTH CHECKS

When your dog feels well, they are less likely to be over-reactive. Therefore one of the first steps to resolving reactivity is getting your dog booked for a thorough health check with their vet.

You can help your vet by providing as much information as possible. Take videos of your dog walking, trotting and running from several angles, including side on as well as coming towards you and moving away. Take videos or pictures of how your dog typically stands, sits and lies down. These will help your vet determine if there are any underlying joint or muscular issues which could be causing pain and contributing to your dog's reactivity.

Another key area for investigation is the mouth. This is especially true for senior dogs who can suffer extreme discomfort due to progressive mouth issues. Brushing your dog's teeth will help to prevent issues and maintain good oral health. However some dogs will need dental treatment if there are existing issues.

If your dog has an imbalance in their gut, this can also be a factor in their reactivity. This may show as changes in their poo but can also show in posture or behavioural changes after eating, itchiness or reddening of the skin.

Dogs often don't show how much pain they are in, so it's important that you pay attention to small details and seek advice from your vet early. Always talk to your vet if you see any sudden changes in your dog's health or behaviour.



# THE IMPACT OF DIET

It is often said that we are what we eat and the same is true of your dog. Food can be an important factor in over-reactivity in a number of ways.

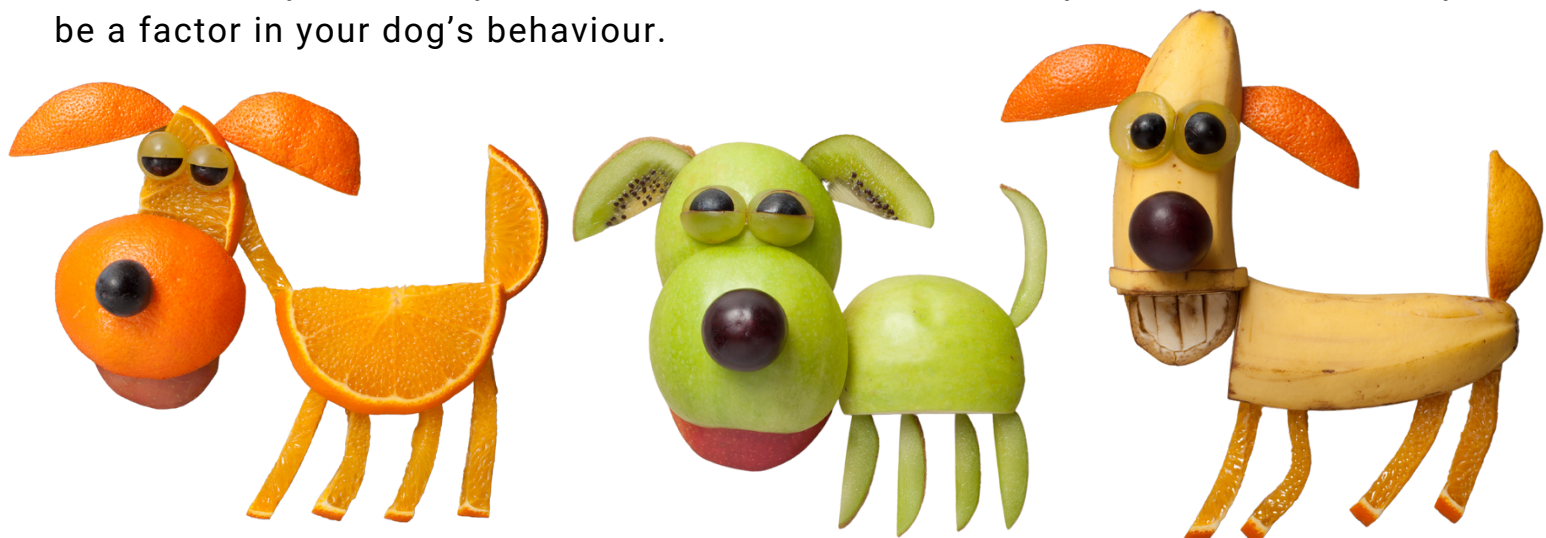
Your dog needs food that suits them. There is no single diet that is perfect for all dogs so find a diet that works for your dog. Consider the quality of ingredients and avoid additives and colourants that may cause issues.

Be mindful of the protein sources as some dogs have sensitivities that can lead to allergies, discomfort, restlessness or over arousal. If your dog's behaviour changes after eating, try an alternative and see if it makes a difference.

Also think about how your dog eats. Dogs are natural scavengers and searching for food allows them to use their noses. So use appropriate puzzle feeders, snuffle mats or scatter feeding for some of your dog's meals. Chewing is an important stress reliever for dogs as well as excellent enrichment and exercise. So make sure your dog has the opportunity to chew safely.

If you feed your dog once a day, their sugar levels will rise after that meal and then dip when they have not eaten for some time. Drops in sugar levels can lead to irritability and mood swings. Dividing food into two or even three smaller meals can maintain your dog's blood sugar at a more consistent level and help to stabilise their mood.

So when it comes to diet, it is not just important what your dog eats but how and when they eat as well. Consider all of these things when deciding on your dog's diet and always consult your vet or a canine nutritionist if you think that diet may be a factor in your dog's behaviour.



# PHYSICAL CLUES

Our dog's posture and gait can give us clues about conditions that may be lit.

A balanced posture will be four square with the shoulder above the elbow down to the foot at the front and a curved bend of stifle going down to the hock joint at the back. Looking from the front or back the legs should be parallel and not splayed inwards or outwards.

Sometimes dogs weight backwards or forwards, which puts added pressure on the hips or shoulders. They can stand base-wide, with either their back or front or all legs positioned further apart than normal. These postures suggest a dog trying to rebalance or take the weight off areas of discomfort.

Be careful about the postures you ask your dog to hold in training - is it a natural and comfortable posture or might it be straining the neck or making our dog adopt an awkward position?



Also look at how mobile your dog is. Do they turn as freely in one direction as the other? Do they show a preference to working on one side of you or the other?

Look at your dog moving, but also standing, sitting and lying down. It is useful to take photos. Do they always sit and lie the same way? Are their hips and hind muscle development even? Are they standing four square? Are their elbows, hocks or feet sticking out? When they move do their feet fall evenly or do they sway, like they are wearing a wet nappy?

Coat pattern changes are also very interesting. Look out for ridges, swirls and tufts especially where these have not always been there or where they are not even on both sides of the body. Look for changes in coat pattern, texture and colour as well as asymmetrical patterns.

These are all subtle clues that your dog might have some physical discomfort. If you see these or have any concerns, ask your trainer or your vet to take a look.



# NERVOUS SYSTEM RESPONSES

Nervous system responses are where the dog's nervous system is automatically reacting to things in the environment.

This includes the subtle body language that we looked at in another video like the tongue flicks, head turns and yawns that can communicate concern. It also includes involuntary muscle movements, breathing or respiration rate and blink rate.

Muscle spasms when the body is touched can indicate physical tension which may be contributing to discomfort. If you see these, note them and see if there is a pattern in how they appear.

Your dog's breathing or respiration rate goes up when they are concerned, so note what their resting respiration is like and note if it changes. Remember though that it is also normal for respiration rate to increase in hot conditions and after exercise.

Watch your dog's eyes. Blinking slowly can be a sign of relaxation but rapid blinking or staring can both be signs of concern. If you see these, take a step back and give your dog space from what is concerning them.

The more you observe your dog, the more you will learn what is normal for them and be able to spot candles being lit.



# WHAT ARE YOUR DOG'S CANDLES?

Candles are a helpful way to think about all the factors that contribute to your dog's reactivity. Everything that makes your dog concerned or uncomfortable or over-excited is a candle. The more candles that are lit, the more likely your dog is to react. Think of it as increasing heat. And we can reduce that heat - and the reactivity - by "blowing out" candles.

Candles can be big things like joint pain or stomach pain, equipment, grooming or handling, noise, medical conditions, such as allergies, visitors, other dogs playing, or little things like the tags jangling on your dog's collar.

Some of these candles are really easy to blow out. You can change equipment or the way you handle and replace jangly tags with sliders. Other candles can be blown out or at least reduced by working with your vet. Some may be more persistent.

But if you can blow out any candles at all, the overall heat will be reduced and that is what matters. In the next videos you will learn more about how to spot when candles are lit for your dog.



# INTRODUCTION TO BODY LANGUAGE

We can all recognise the obvious behaviors of reactivity: barking, lunging and growling. But are you aware of the behaviors that often happen before this?

Learning your dog's body language will help you see what your dog is telling you well before they have to shout by barking, lunging or growling!

Dogs communicate their discomfort in many subtle ways. Consider what your dog does before they overreact? Does their mouth go from open to closed? Do their ears get tall and forward? Does the tail go high up or is there a change in how they walk? Body language is like a sentence, specific body parts are words but the whole body tells the story.

Seeing how your dog communicates with their body can be a game changer when it comes to resolving reactivity. Let's look at the head turn as an example.

If your dog turns their head and their upper body follows to go and enjoy a good sniff, that's fantastic. This is a nice cut-off signal that says, "I am not a threat" and your dog might use this behavior to diffuse a situation that they are finding stressful.



If your dog turns their head and averts their eyes to the left or right yet the rest of the body remains stationary, this is saying, "I need a break for a minute." Stop whatever you are doing and wait for your dog to turn their head forward again before continuing.

If your dog turns their head while keeping their eyes focused on a trigger, this communicates a very high level of stress - you'll see the side of their face and the whites of their eyes. This says, "I need that to stop right now, please!"

When your dog is on alert they might face forward and hold their head high - perhaps they hear or smell something?

When they dip their head very low and sideways, they may be communicating fear and concern.

This is just one example of how important a dog's body language is. It is a quiet, polite communication but if you notice it, your dog may not have to shout, "please stop!"





# BODY LANGUAGE - THE MOUTH

We always have to look at body language in context but the mouth has a lot to say!

When your dog's mouth moves from relaxed and open to closed, this can be a sign that your dog is processing something they are concerned about. If they are standing comfortably but with a closed mouth, do a small prompt to see if they can disengage.

If their mouth remains closed and gets tight, where you can see wrinkles or ridges around the corners of their mouth, it's time to interrupt and help them move away. Their stress level is definitely going up.

If your dog pulls their lips back all the way to show their teeth and their mouth is open, this may be to cool themselves, or may indicate concern or uncertainty. This is especially true if they are panting and it isn't hot. Take a look around for things of concern and do what you need to help them relax.

Some dogs will keep their mouth closed but raise a corner of their lip to show a portion of their front teeth. They may even pull their front lips up high to show all of their teeth. This is a warning. Your dog is asking for space so you should back away and ensure that others do the same.



A more subtle communication with the mouth is the tongue flick. A tongue flick is when your dog's tongue goes straight out, over the nose, and back in the mouth. It happens without any contact with food. A tongue flick usually indicates a level of uncertainty or discomfort in that moment, and more than one tongue flick, especially in combination with a head turn, is a good sign of increasing stress.

When your dog does a tongue flick, stop and note what they might be responding to in the environment – what do they see, hear or smell? Is it your movement, another dog, a person, a sudden change in the environment?

If you see multiple tongue flicks, look at changing what is happening to reduce stress for your dog. If you are petting them, pause and remove your hand. If you are on a walk, cross the street. If you have guests, ask them to sit down and stay seated while you help your dog move away.

Learn what your dog's mouth is communicating and you'll be on your way to speaking dog!



# BODY LANGUAGE - THE EARS

The ears are often what people notice because they can be a quick sign of alertness. For almost all dogs, they'll go up and forward, even floppy ears will get a little higher and move forward.

If a dog is super scared, they may hold their ears very flat and back. However, your dog may also do this when they are really excited to see you.

Your dog's hearing is much more sensitive than any human's. This means they may hear a trigger well before you can see it.

If your dog's ears change from their natural position to high and forward, or pulled back and flat with a tense body and mouth, stop what you are doing and think about what they might be responding to in the environment – is it you, another dog, a person, a sudden change or something else? Respond appropriately by creating space or giving your dog something else to focus on.

Practice listening to what your dog's ears are telling you. These important clues will set you on the right path to resolving their reactivity.



# BODY LANGUAGE - THE TAIL

A wagging tail has many meanings. Sometimes it conveys happiness, but sometimes it can be a sign your dog is deeply uncomfortable. A wagging tail means your dog is engaged. Look at the posture and position to decide if your dog is happy, or on high alert.

A happy wag is usually a big circle, accompanied by a loose, wiggly body.

Most dogs, when on high alert, will hold their tails high and stiff and often show very fast tail movement.

Some dogs may swing their tails very low and slow when they are unsure or nervous. If they have a naturally curly tail, it may uncurl or it may go flat against their hind-end.

Almost all dogs, when very scared, will “tuck their tail” tight against their body, so it goes under and between their legs.

Watch your dog's tail. When it changes to a high alert, or a low swing, stop what you are doing and notice what they are responding to in the environment.

Tail carriage is a valuable piece of information to help you understand your dog. Learn the differences your dog shows so you can best support your dog.



# BODY LANGUAGE - MOVEMENT

If your dog starts to increase their speed towards something you know they are worried about, slow them down to a stop and help them move in any direction other than forward.

Slowing down helps your dog to process what's up ahead and stopping can give them the time they need to think. However, stopping may not be enough to help your dog relax. If they have stopped and are looking for longer than a few seconds, prompt them to interrupt and move on. If they are still fixated and staring intensely, this is a clear warning that your dog's stress level is rising and you need to help them move right away.

When you see your dog slowing down on their own, moving in arcs, stopping, backing up, or changing direction, you can be confident that they are choosing safety over danger. They are making great choices, so support them by moving with them every time.



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# DISCOVER YOUR DOG'S FAVOURITE TREATS

Dogs naturally like food, and just like you, they have preferences about flavours and textures! Some prefer their treats to be crunchy and hard while others like them soft and chewy.

When working with over-reactivity you want to use treats that your dog loves so how can you find out what their favourite foods are for training?

Start by assembling a range of treats. What do you think your dog might like? Ideally include a range of textures and flavours. Try a variety of commercial dog treats, homemade treats and human food, such as cooked meat, cheese or peanut butter. You are going to rank all the treats in order of preference so you will also need a sheet of paper to note down your results.

Take the first two treats. Let's call them Treat A and Treat B. Place them in front of your dog at the same moment and wait to see which treat they choose to eat first.

Repeat this a few times, mixing up where you place the treats so that you are not always placing Treat A on the left and Treat B on the right or you might simply find out that they prefer to take food from one particular side!

If Treat A is always chosen, then note down that A is preferred to B and repeat the process again, this time comparing Treat A with a different treat, Treat C. If there is no preference between them then note this too.

Keep on comparing treats in pairs until you have a ranked list of your dog's preferences. Now make sure that you have your dog's favourite treats with you when you go out to train. It will make all the difference to your success.



# ACE FREE WORK

ACE Free Work is a great way to help your dog calm and relax. It naturally uses all of your dog's senses and provides low impact exercise, sensory enrichment and the opportunity to explore and investigate. Sniffing, licking and chewing are all naturally calming activities for dogs and this exercise incorporates them all.

You start by setting out different elements including surfaces, so there is a range of things to walk over; enrichment activities, such as snuffle mats, lickimats, and ball pits; and a number of stations of different heights. You also need to have water bowls, ideally more than one and one of them raised.

You then prime this area with food. You will need three types of food: small, easy to eat treats; soft food that can be spread on surfaces, such as cream cheese or peanut butter; and larger crunchy but still edible chews.

Scatter the small treats on the surfaces and in the enrichment activities. Also scatter some on the ground near these so your dog does not have to step on surfaces to get the treats. Spread the soft food on lickimats and surfaces that your dog can lick. Hide a couple of the larger chews so that your dog can exercise their jaw. Always be aware of the potential for resource guarding and don't use these larger treats if this is an issue for your dog.





If it is safe, take all equipment off your dog so they are not wearing a harness or collar. Then simply allow your dog to explore. Don't direct them or encourage them in a particular direction or lure them onto any surfaces. Just allow them to explore and stand back and observe. What do you see? Video if you can as this is very useful to help you spot posture and gait issues.

You can do Free Work anywhere – and you don't need a lot of space. You can work outside in the garden or yard, inside the house, on a balcony even in a kennel run. Start with just a few elements and keep them close together especially if your dog is very busy!

Use what you have got in the house: plastic crates, cardboard boxes, bits of old carpet, mats, towels, bubble wrap, any enrichment toys your dog has got. A rolled up towel with treats hidden in it or a cardboard box with scrunched up paper and treats inside make cheap and easy enrichment activities.

Have fun!



# USING DIARIES

Keeping a diary about your dog and your life together can be a really important part of making progress. This is especially useful at the start of your journey, when something has changed or deteriorated or when you reach a point where you need to review.

Your diary gives you accurate, detailed information about what is happening with you and your dog. This information can show connections between different aspects of your dog's life. For example, if your dog becomes more reactive after eating, your diary will tell you and this can help identify secondary triggers such as allergies.

Your diary is also important as a way of documenting the progress you are making so you can celebrate your wins. And it allows you to communicate much more effectively with your trainer and other professionals.

So what do you record in your diary? Initially note down everything you can think of - it is better to write more than you think you need than to find critical information missing. You can always cut back on detail later!

Record your dog's sleep patterns - where, how often, and how deeply are they sleeping? What choices do they make about sleep?



Record their eating and drinking habits. What do they eat and when? Note the time and be specific about the type of food and protein source. How much do they drink and how often? Also make a note of when they toilet and other indicators of health such as ease of movement.

Note how your dog plays and interacts with you and others. How much are they playing and are there specific times they choose to play more or less? If play is decreasing or slowing down then it may indicate discomfort.

Keep track of exercise and outings including what types of activities your dog is doing - especially if they are things that are exciting or concerning for them. Note down when your dog is tired afterwards as this may influence their behaviour later.

It is also important to jot down external factors that might influence your dog such as the weather. Heat, wind and rain can all have an impact on behaviour.

Don't forget to also keep track of your own mood as this can influence your dog. Are you having a good day or a not so good one? Are you feeling pressure from elsewhere, such as work or family, which is influencing your responses?

This may seem like a lot of information but it can be easy to note down on a simple form. You will quickly find the benefits make the effort worthwhile as you learn so much more about your dog that will support you both on your journey.



# DESCRIBING BEHAVIOUR

Describing your dog's behaviour is very important when working with your trainer or vet to help resolve your dog's over-reactivity. Labels such as stubborn, friendly, angry or happy can have very different meanings to different people which can affect how they interpret your dog's behaviour. So it's important that you learn how to describe your dog's behaviour in terms of their body language, what they actually did, what the context was, and what happened as a result rather than simply assigning it a label.

Instead of saying your dog was "happy" think about describing what you see such as them wagging their tail loosely with an open mouth and a wiggly body.

Instead of using "stubborn" describe what your dog did. For example they stayed outside when you called them into the house.

Next time you want to use a label, think about what that label means to you and instead offer a detailed description. Describing behaviour with as many specifics as possible can help you and your trainer better understand your dog's behaviour.



# SETTING GOALS TO MAKE PROGRESS

It is important to have clear goals for what you want to do with your dog. After all, if you don't know what you are aiming at, you're unlikely to hit the mark! Goals keep you focused – when you have a decision to make about what to do with your dog, they can help you choose. Will this help you move toward your goal?

Being clear about your goals also helps you to assess whether they are reasonable and realistic both for you and your dog. There may be times when what you'd like is something that just doesn't suit your dog. For example, if your ultimate goal is to be able to take them to a dog park but your dog prefers not to socialise, this is never going to be a reasonable aim for your dog.

Be specific about what you want to achieve so that you can easily know when you reach your goal.

Goals can be big things that may take a longer time to work through - perhaps you want to be able to take your dog with you to the pub while you have a meal. But they can also be smaller and shorter term goals, like teaching your dog how to settle for 5 minutes. You can, of course, have more than one goal!

Once you have this clarity, then you can outline the actions you need to take and make the progress you're looking for.



The **GROW** model is a great way to progress with your goals. First identify your **Goal**. What do you want to achieve? How do you want to feel? Why is this important to you? And importantly, would your dog share your goal?

Then look at the **Reality** of where you and your dog are right now. How close to your goal are you? What have you tried already and what happened? What is the gap between your Goal and your current Reality?

Then work out what **Options** are available to you to bridge this gap. What is in your toolbox already? What are the pros and cons of each option? What is going to suit you and your dog best?

Then choose your **Way Forward**. What is your next step? When are you going to do it? Whose support do you need and is there anything more you need to learn or practice?

This is a helpful way to clarify your goals, particularly those big picture goals that you really want to achieve. Once you have this clarity, then you can outline the actions you need to take and make the progress you're looking for.

