



Thriving (Not Just Surviving) With Your Fearful or Reactive Dog

5 Things You Need to Know Right Now

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There is a path forward for you and your dog.

You've probably had walks that ended with you speed-walking home, heart pounding, hoping none of your neighbors saw that. Or maybe you've stopped walking your dog altogether because it's just not worth it.

Here's what I want you to know: your dog is not broken, and you have not failed them. Fear and reactivity in dogs is incredibly common — and with the right approach, real progress is absolutely possible.

The biggest surprise for most people? Most of this work has nothing to do with training. It starts with your dog's stress levels, their environment, and their confidence — and we build from there.

Here are five things that make the biggest difference. Each one comes with something you can actually try today.

Less practice, less reaction.

Every time your dog barks at the window, lunges at another dog, or goes ballistic when someone rings the doorbell — that behavior gets a little more automatic. The more they practice it, the stronger it gets. So the first thing we do is make it harder for the behavior to happen at all.

This isn't avoiding the problem. It's buying you time while your dog learns new ways to cope. Some easy wins:

- Put frosted window film on the lower half of your front windows so your dog can't patrol the street
- Put a sign on your door asking visitors to text instead of knock or ring the bell
- Walk at 6am or after 9pm when fewer dogs are out
- Cross the street before your dog even notices the trigger — not after

Try this: Pick one situation where your dog practices the unwanted behavior. Make one change to your environment or routine that makes it less likely or better yet impossible to happen.

A stressed dog can't learn (very well).

Think about the last time you were really anxious or overwhelmed. Could you focus? Could you take in new information? Probably not. Dogs are the same way.

Reactivity is almost always a stress response. And stress stacks up — a barking dog behind a fence, a garbage truck rumbling past, a delivery person rings the doorbell. By the time you hit the evening walk, your dog is already maxed out. That's why they sometimes seem to lose it over something that didn't bother them yesterday.

Before any training can work, your dog's nervous system needs to come down. Simple things that help:

- Long, slow "sniff walks" where your dog leads and you follow — no agenda, just sniffing
- A bully stick or frozen Kong or lick mat stuffed with yogurt, wet dog food or peanut butter
- 12 to 16 hours of uninterrupted rest per 24hrs — most reactive dogs are overtired
- A predictable daily routine so your dog always knows what's coming next

One thing to cut back on: fetch and high-energy play. It feels like exercise but it spikes the same stress hormones as fear. A dog who is always "on" has no room to come down.

Try this: Add one sniffy walk this week. No training, no agenda. Let your dog sniff every single thing they want to sniff. Notice if they seem more relaxed when you get home. Try to walk at times when there are less triggers or go to a low traffic natural area.

Confidence is built, not born.

A lot of fearful dogs have never really gotten to just be a dog. Sniff things out, solve little problems, explore at their own pace without any pressure. Enrichment activities give them exactly that — and over time, small wins in low-pressure situations add up to a dog who feels genuinely more capable in the world.

You don't need fancy equipment:

- Hide kibble or treats around your backyard and let your dog find them
- Give them a snuffle mat or lick mat at mealtimes instead of a bowl
- Let them investigate a new smell, object, or texture at their own pace — no pushing, no luring
- Take them somewhere quiet and new and just let them explore on a long line

The key ingredient is choice. Fearful dogs do much better when they get to decide whether to approach something or not. Letting your dog say "no thanks" to something unfamiliar — without any pressure from you — is actually one of the most confidence-building things you can do.

Try this: At your dog's next mealtime, scatter their food in the grass or hide it around a room for them to find. Or hide their food in an egg carton or cardboard box. Let them rip and tear it apart. Watch how differently they carry themselves when they're in problem-solving mode.

Self-Control is a muscle. (Strengthen it.)

One of the most useful things a reactive dog can learn is the ability to notice something and not immediately explode. That split second between "I see the trigger" and "I react" is where all your training lives. And you can actually teach your dog to find that pause.

We build this through simple games in calm, trigger-free environments first — not out in the wild where everything is already too much. Think of it like learning to take a deep breath before a tough conversation. You practice it when things are easy so it's available when things get hard.

Some exercises that build this skill:

- Leave It — teaching your dog to look away from something tempting
- Place training — teaching your dog to go to a specific spot and settle
- Watch the World — sitting together quietly and minding your business
- Paws Up — putting their front paws on a low object is grounding

All of these start inside with zero distractions. We are not heading to a busy park to practice. We build the skill first, then very gradually introduce more challenging environments.

Try this: Teach Leave It using a treat in your closed fist. When your dog stops nosing at your hand and backs off, say "Good!" and give them a treat from a treat pouch (NOT the treat in your hand). That moment of "I want it but I'll wait" is exactly the skill we're building toward.

Foundations First, Triggers Later.

Most people start working directly around unpredictable triggers — and this is why they feel stuck and in over their head. They are not ready and their dog is not ready. It's like asking someone to give a speech in front of a crowd before they've ever practiced public speaking.

When your dog has lower stress, more confidence, better impulse control, and alternative skills that can replace the barking and lunging — then we start working around triggers. And when we do, distance and safe set-ups are key.

We use set-ups: planned, controlled situations where we choose the trigger, the distance, and the environment in advance. This is not your dog's regular sniffy walk. This helps you feel less stressed and ensures your dog succeeds.

Distance is everything in these set-ups. We find the distance where your dog can see the trigger but is not reacting. Maybe that's half a block away. Maybe it's across a whole parking lot. That's your starting point. Dog sees trigger, dog gets something amazing - hot dogs! That's it. We're letting your dog build a new association at their own pace.

Sessions are short and not done daily — dogs need time to recover. Your dog's choices guide the whole process. We always end on a calm note.

This is the high-stakes part of the work, and it's where having a trainer in your corner makes the biggest difference. Every dog's triggers, responses, and the context are different. There's no one-size-fits-all protocol at this step.

Try this: Grab a notebook and start a trigger log. Write down every time your dog reacts — what the trigger was, where you were, how far away it was, and what they did. Note how long it took them to settle down. Be specific. Ex. man in hat, after dinner, windy day, etc. That information is the starting point for every training plan. When you're ready to work with a trainer, you'll already have exactly what they need.

Just The Beginning.

This guide is just the beginning. The full Confident & Calm Training System walks you through all seven steps — with videos, handouts, and support at every stage.

You can start for free on my YouTube channel, where I cover the whole system step by step. And if you want personalized help for your specific dog, I work with clients one-on-one in via Zoom — wherever you are in the world.

You've already done the hard part by finding a starting point. Let's build on that.

Ready for personalized support?

Book a free training call to find out whether 1:1 coaching is the right fit for you and your dog. I work with clients worldwide via Zoom. Visit: jengpywell.com

About Jen G. Pywell

Jen G. Pywell (CPDT-KA, FDM, HDT) is a certified dog trainer specializing in fear and reactivity. She uses force-free, trauma-informed methods and is the creator of the Confident & Calm Dog Training System — a 7-step progressive system to reduce fear and reactivity in dogs. Jen works with clients in person in Montclair, New Jersey, and coaches clients online worldwide.



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