

Session title: **Working through the higher levels of the ODE protocol: Adding in distractions / "triggers"**.

Presenter: Sharon Carroll

Time: Friday (October 6) 1:40pm-3:40pm

Location: Hall 4

Session description: In this session we will use the ODE protocol to help our dog to build their skills for ignoring distractions / "triggers" (e.g. people / dogs / movement / sound). We will also discuss how and when to implement the final steps of the protocol (i.e. adding in reinforced alternative behaviors, and increasing arousal up to the optimal level required for sport / play behaviors, without our dog reverting to focusing on the stimulus/trigger). The working spots in this session are perfectly suited to any team that has started working with the ODE protocol previously. There is no requirement to have achieved a certain skill level though, just some previous practice of step 1 or above.

About Offered Durational Engagement (ODE)

When our dog perceives a stimulus that interests or concerns them, a portion of their attention shifts to that stimulus. At this point we may only see evidence of "split focus" (i.e. glancing away from us and the task, responding more slowly to our cues, missing cues, performing an "incorrect" behavior, etc.), or our dog may perform a large reaction that we perceive as inappropriate or extreme (e.g. lunging, barking, whining, squealing, leaping, leaving us and rushing to the stimulus, attempts to run away, unable to respond to our cues in the presence of the stimulus, etc.).

Our dog's response to the stimulus may be driven by emotion (e.g. fear, excitement, frustration, etc.), it may be driven by instinct (e.g. prey drive, etc.), or it may occur due to prior learning (i.e. expectation of a specific outcome, or a previously formed habit).

Offered Durational Engagement (ODE) is a simple pattern that forms the foundations for a 10-step protocol. For dogs responding due to emotions, the protocol helps to reduce the intensity of their feelings and hence their response. For dogs responding due to instinct or habit, the protocol helps our dog to find time to think between the stimulus and their response, so instead of going from stimulus to the existing automatic response, our dog is able to think before responding. This increased cognitive processing allows our dog to choose to perform a more appropriate alternative behavior instead of performing the existing inappropriate or extreme

response. Using positive reinforcement strategies, we can then ensure that our dog perceives the new response as more rewarding than the original response.

ODE is useful as both a behavior modification protocol for reactivity, as well as a protocol for helping our competition dogs build their skills for comfortably ignoring and dismissing people / dogs / movement / sounds in training and competition environments.

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Pre-session notes

(For interest only – not “required reading”)

When we are in the ODE pattern, we can use our dog’s behavior / body language as direct communication from our dog to let us know how they rate the challenge level of the environment.

VERY LOW – Our dog feels no DESIRE or NEED to look at other stimuli in the environment, hence they remain focused on us between each rep to rapidly initiate the next rep (and hence gain access to the next treat).

LOW – Our dog feels some DESIRE or NEED to look around the environment or to focus on a specific stimulus, hence between some (or all) reps our dog briefly shifts their focus away from us. At this level of challenge our dog is able to independently disconnect from focusing on elements in the environment and is able to re-engage with us quickly (within 3 seconds) and without any prompting / interrupting from us.

MODERATE – Our dog feels a fairly strong DESIRE or NEED to look around the environment or to focus on a specific stimulus, hence our dog looks away from us between two reps and gets stuck focusing on a specific stimulus (watching, listening, air scenting). They do not return their focus to us within 3 seconds, but when we use a positive interrupter (e.g. say something, make a noise, squeak a toy, rustle a treat bag, shuffle our feet, wave a piece of food near their nose, etc.), they are able to immediately re-focus on us.

HIGH – Our dog feels a very strong DESIRE or NEED to look around the environment or to focus on a specific stimulus, hence our dog re-orientes their attention away from us and they are not easily interrupted. At this point they may also be performing high energy behaviors (pulling / leaping / spinning, with or without

vocalization), or they may be quite still. The key feature of this level of challenge is the inability to solidly re-focus on us when interrupted / prompted.

This same scale can be used in more general terms (not just in the ODE pattern) as per the chart below. The two key areas we assess are our 1. dog’s ability to engage with us, and 2. their “interest” in stimuli other than us and the task we are working on.

Intensity	Engagement	Focus on stimulus
Very Low	Dog fully engaged and readily takes treats.	Mostly not interested.
Low	Dog can engage and take treats but is distracted.	Starting to need to repeatedly check on stimulus.
Moderate	Dog can intermittently engage and can typically still take treats.	Gets stuck on stimulus at times but is able to disengage.
High	Dog cannot engage and typically cannot take treats.	Re-orientes all focus to stimulus.

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When we use the ODE pattern to “test” our dog’s feelings about an area, and we observe responses that rate as LOW or MODERATE (as opposed to VERY LOW) then ideally, we don’t move on to ask for competition-type behaviors. This is because our dog’s behavior in the ODE pattern informs us that any “work” we undertake at that time will likely be of a reduced quality. When we ignore this information and attempt to start our training session (“work”) before our dog is ready, we will have to work extremely hard to acquire and maintain our dog’s attention. Continuing to train / “work” when our dog is disengaged and unfocused can induce frustration both in us and our dog and can contribute to the development of a range of unwanted habits.

When we attempt to undertake training / “work” before our dog is ready our dog may:

- Ignore us entirely (or look at us as though they have never heard that cue before!).
- Need “nagging” (repeated cues) reminding them to remain focused on us and/or the task.
- Shift their focus continually between us and other stimuli in the environment.
- Suddenly freeze or get stuck focusing on another stimulus in the middle of training / competing.

- Perform “known” behaviors in a slow way.
- Require repeated cues to perform a “known” behavior.
- Perform incorrect responses to our cues (e.g. down when we say sit).
- Miss cues entirely.
- Anticipate cues.
- Appear uninterested.
- Bark at us.
- Perform “zoomies”.
- Run off to “visit” other people / dogs.
- Run off to investigate objects / pieces of equipment.
- Perform displacement behaviors (e.g. scratching, self-grooming, sniffing the ground).

Many of the above issues can result from increased emotionality (e.g. fear, excitement, anxiety, frustration, etc.); it could be that our dog is feeling unsafe in that space and needs to continually survey the environment in order to feel safe/comfortable, alternatively, it could be that our dog is extremely stimulated, interested, excited, or even frustrated (by not being able to interact with interesting stimuli in the environment).

The high emotionality then drives arousal up and as a result our dog’s focus narrows onto a lesser number of cues/stimuli. If our dog’s narrowed focus / attention includes us and our cues, we may just see some spillage of excess behaviors (whining, barking, etc.), or we may not even notice the effects of the heightened arousal; we may even say our dog is very “focused” and working well. However, more commonly our dog’s narrowed focus / attention does not include us and our cues, in these cases we instead say our dog is very “distracted”. In reality of course our dog may be quite focused just on a stimulus other than us, or they may be struggling with having their attention split between us and the other stimuli.

Ideally when training / competing, we want our dog to remain fully focused on us for most tasks, and even at times when our dog’s attention needs to be split between us and other relevant objects / stimuli (e.g. agility obstacles, dumbbells, bumpers, gloves, articles, a decoy in ring sport, livestock in herding, etc.), we still need our dog to be able to rapidly respond to information (cues) we give them. Having to compete for our dog’s attention is not fun and rarely results in highly successful competition performances, due to our dog missing cues, anticipating cues, responding slowly, being inaccurate / imprecise, or performing incorrect behaviors.

To avoid having a disengaged dog we need to undertake a lot of foundation work ahead of time, this ensures that our dog has the skillset needed to work in a

stimulating space. We also need to have an acclimation protocol for use when arriving at a venue, as well as a method of assessing whether our dog is ready to work or not, in that space. The acclimation phase will include a moving component and a stationary component but will vary for each individual dog. For some dogs the acclimation period will be very brief, for others it will need to be more substantial. After the acclimation phase is complete, we can then use ODE to assess if the environment is still having a significant impact on our dog.

When undertaking ODE for this purpose there are three potential outcomes as per the chart below.

<p>Our dog categorizes the environment as <u>easy</u>.</p>	<p>Our dog indicates they can give us full focus (are showing responses in the Very Low zone of ODE) in multiple locations within the space.</p> <p>In this case our dog is ready to work now.</p>
<p>Our dog categorizes the environment as <u>challenging</u>.</p>	<p>Our dog initially indicates they cannot give us full focus, so we allow additional time for acclimation and try again. At this point they can give us full focus (are showing responses in the Very Low zone of ODE) in multiple locations within the space.</p> <p>Our dog is now ready to work.</p>
<p>Our dog categorizes the environment as <u>too challenging</u> for their existing skillset.</p>	<p>Our dog initially indicates they cannot give us full focus, so we allow additional time for acclimation and try again. On trying again our dog is still unable to give us full focus. In this case we usually will deem the environment is too big at this time for this dog.</p> <p>We go away to do further work on ODE and settled stationing in more environments and with more varied stimuli.</p>

Our dog's perception of the surrounding environment and stimuli within it is one of the primary factors that will impact whether our dog is ready to work in a given space or not. ODE can provide us with information that will help us to determine our dog's comfort level and ability to focus, in a particular space.

However, it should always be remembered that responses to the environment are not the only reason a dog may disengage from their handler. When we are working with a dog who appears comfortable during the acclimation phase and is easily able to perform ODE in various locations around the venue, but then goes on to

disengage when entering the ring, setting up at the start line / start peg, or during our training or competition routine, then we need to take an honest look at the other possible causes. These may include previously poisoned cues / situations, or the avoidance could be associated with confusion or training pressure that is occurring in the moment. Working on desensitization to elements in the environment will not improve performance if the cause for the errors or deterioration in focus/work is not related to the impact of stimuli in the environment.

In this practical session we will start with a brief discussion about the drivers of engagement and the impact of different types of “distractions”. We will also outline all 10 steps of the ODE protocol, with particular emphasis on steps 9 and 10.

[Throughout steps 1 to 8 of the ODE protocol we utilize the stationary ODE pattern, however at step 9 we shift to using our competition behaviors instead of the ODE pattern, and at step 10 we rehearse higher arousal levels (if required for competition / performance)].

The working teams in this session may be training at any point between step 2 and step 10 on the ODE protocol. Hence it is likely we will see some dogs undertaking the ODE pattern with simple distractions added to the environment, whilst others may be working through much more intense distractions.

Those unfamiliar with the ODE protocol may find it beneficial to attend the Friday morning session “An introduction to the ODE protocol” (9:15am-10:45am in Hall 3) also, where we will be working with teams on steps 1 to 3. Attending the morning session though is definitely not essential, the afternoon session will be very comprehensive even for those without any prior knowledge of the ODE protocol.