

Calming Ovals

Kay Laurence, a great trainer from the UK, recently introduced us to a simple and effective exercise to help calm and focus your dog. The result is not just a dog that calms down; this simple exercise also seems to calm the handler – which in turn calms the dog down! In addition, a natural outgrowth of this self-control exercise is that your dog will begin watching your body language more closely (such as moving with your shoulders), focus more on you instead of the outside environment, and understand that they cannot control your actions. As a result, calming ovals will help with your loose leash walk or heel and be an overall help in calming your dog – especially in quieting down an aroused dog.

First, it's really important that you hold the leash as specified so that the dog does not get inadvertent body signals that they may interpret as "I should pull!". Also, this method protects you from getting thrown off balance, pulling a muscle or injuring yourself if the dog makes a sudden move. When you hold the leash as instructed below, you'll find that you will have a much better center of balance from which to operate – and your dog knows it!

Use a 6-foot long nylon or leather leash and a regular buckle collar (tight enough that it won't slip over the dog's head), or if necessary you can use a martingale (limited slip) collar. Put both arms out straight in front of you and face your palms up towards the sky (yep, pretend you're going to do the Macarena!). Now, slip the loop of the leash over one hand and around the wrist, take up some of the excess leash by wrapping it a few times around your hand. Place that hand against the center of your body – between your sternum and belly-button. Place your other hand over the top of that hand. This gives you a secure hold with both hands.

To begin doing the "calming ovals," it's also important that you do not click, do not treat, do not talk to the dog or give the dog any attention. Your dog is about to find out that nothing it can do will change the handler's behavior. You are completely neutral in this exercise. With the dog to your left, begin walking clockwise at a SLOW pace, (a dawdling gait is appropriate for this exercise) in an oval pattern. It's very important that your dog does not trot, pace, or run during this exercise. You need to go slow enough so the dog will walk. The oval can be about 6 feet long. Your dog will probably stop to sniff or be distracted by various things. Fine, just keep walking. Do not jerk or pull on your dog, just keep your hands as instructed and keep walking. When you get to the turn in the oval, if your dog crosses in front of you, use what we call "big feet." This is a very deliberate large step either in front of or under your dog. The result is they will generally scurry back to your left side. If they go to your right side, stop and bring them back around to your left. You can walk the oval anywhere from 10 to 20 times. When the dog is walking calmly, and focusing more on you than the outside environment, you can start figure eights. Do this often with your dog to teach the dog how to calm down. You can also use the "calming ovals" in situations where your dog is getting aroused, such as before you go into the agility field for practice or before you enter a ring for a public freestyle demonstration. You'll be surprised at how much this will help to calm the dog. As I said earlier, an important outcome from this exercise is that you will have an improved loose-leash walk or heel because your dog is learning to focus on you instead of everything else in the environment.

Eventually, you can add some distractions. Start by arranging a distraction on one end of the oval pattern, so that the dog can retain calmness on the rest of the oval, and then approach the distraction again. Once this is going well, you could add another distraction. At some point multiple distractions can be used. Remember to keep your pace SLOW!

We consistently use this exercise to help calm the dogs before a group class. Many dogs find going in and out of the door of our training center quite exciting. You can do the "calming oval" pattern as you move slowly towards, then half-way through the door, and eventually all the way through the door – either coming or going. Do a few ovals, walk a little ways, and do a few more. Perhaps, do the oval walking all the way to your car from the training center or all the way into the building the next time you come to class.

After Kay was here and gave a presentation on walking ovals, I added this technique to my classes. I immediately saw a significant improvement with many dogs using this simple, yet effective, protocol.

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