



Dog Reactivity

What is reactivity?

Types of reactivity

Over excitement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doggy Daycare • Over socialization • Genetics • Lack of impulse control 	Barrier Frustration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On leash • Behind a fence • Trauma • Genetics
Aggression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genetics • Medical issues • Very rare 	Fearful <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma • Genetics • Under/over socialized

Genetics play a very large role in behavior
It is NOT all in how you raise them
It is NOT your fault your dog is reactive

Reactivity is a very generalized word for a very broad range of dog behavior. Reactivity can look like a dog lunging, barking, and growling on a leash at passing people and dogs. It can also be a very quiet direct stare at another dog or people that can result in a bite. It refers to any dog behavior in which the dog doesn't try to, or have the ability to use any coping skills or think before responding to a situation. Reactive dogs lash out in frustration or fear in the presence of triggers. Basic triggers are people and dogs, but it is not limited to just these two options.

Why are dogs reactive?

There are a few major things that will affect your dog which are genetics, trauma, and over or under socialization.

What is threshold?

The definition of "threshold" is the point where a stimulus is at a strong enough intensity to cause a reaction. A threshold is analyzed in all kinds of animals (including humans) who may be showing fear, anxiety, aggression, or other strong emotional reactions towards a certain object, animal, or place.

So to simplify this - threshold is your dog's max. Max of stress, anxiety, fear, excitement, aggression, or any other emotional response. A dog over threshold will react, a dog at threshold will be aware of the trigger and may react, a dog under threshold will be aware of the trigger but at a great enough distance that they don't feel the need to respond. We want to keep your dog under threshold, only at this point can we help the dog.



My dog is just stubborn!

If your dog is not responding to a cue consider the following: they haven't generalized the cue (they only know sit when they are directly in front of you and don't understand that it means the same thing with their back turned to you), your reward isn't great enough, they aren't paying attention to you, or they are over threshold. If your dog is at or over threshold they don't respond to cues because they are past the point of cognitive function and they can't. Your dog reacts out of fear, and at this point has lost the mental capacity to respond to your cues, so don't correct or get frustrated with your dog when they are stuck in mental panic, or you're applying pain and intimidation to fear. Corrections won't solve reactivity. You will likely suppress behavior, but you haven't changed the way the dog associates/feels to the trigger.



What is trigger stacking?

Think of your dog's threshold like a scale. On one side will be the weight of your triggers. The other side will carry the weight of your dog's mental stability. As triggers are stacked on top of each other the weight on the trigger side becomes so great that your dog cannot handle any situation. If we help desensitize and change the response to triggers, your dog will be much better prepared.

Dogs also need time to decompress and calm down after exposure to triggers. Each dog is different and deals with stress according to what they are able to handle. Some dogs may react after a couple of trigger exposures, while others can handle much more.



Example

Say you have a dog that you adopted during Covid quarantine. As a result, only a couple of people have been in your home since you got the dog, and he barked at them and seemed unsure, but you assume it's just because he hasn't met these people before.

Now, as last-minute decision, your family and friends are heading to your house for a get-together. You immediately become anxious as you scramble to get ready, (and your dog picks up on this and becomes anxious as well.) Unsure of how your dog will react, you put on his leash and let him drag it around the house. (You have never practiced putting the leash on your dog in the house before and he becomes increasingly anxious.)

There is a knock at the door; you look at the clock they are early! You move quickly towards the door, and instead, you find a Fed-ex driver with a package you need to sign for. You reach to open the door and your dog begins barking, growling, and lunging at the delivery driver. You grab the leash and pull him back with all your strength; you manage to get him back to grab your package and quickly close the door. (Your dog is already over threshold.)

You are surprised by the response of your dog and decide to let him out in the yard before everyone arrives. (While out in the yard an off-leash dog approaches your fence and begins fighting with your dog through the fence.)

When you let him back in the house you notice he is pacing and panting, and then a knock on the door. You answer the door and welcome your friends and family. (Your dog who has had no chance to calm himself explodes, barking, lunging, and reaching out trying to bite anyone he can.)

Too much stress was put on this dog, as more triggers were stacked he never had a chance to calm down. We missed a lot of opportunities to help this dog, and as a result, he was set up to fail.

Enrichment

There are many types of enrichment for your dog including, snuffle mats, training, or giving your dog a job. Enrichment can be very helpful to give your dog a mental workout. Enrichment is an important part of decompression as well: chewing, licking, and sniffing help to calm the brain down. Keeping loaded enrichment toys (frozen kong, puzzle toy, etc) can help when you need to calm your dog down. You can download a free enrichment handout here:

www.rescuek9training.org/problem-behavior-help



It is time to start talking dog

How is it that dogs communicate so beautifully without saying a word? All that body language!

So, let's start with the basics, "a wagging tail means a happy dog right?" Nope, not always. Dogs with wagging tails can growl, lunge, and bite.

"A dog on their back wants me to rub their belly right?" Nope, they may want you to back away completely.

"Every time my dog growls I correct them and tell them NO! Because I don't want a mean dog." If you always correct your dog when they growl, they will likely growl less, but not bite less. Think of it like taking the batteries out of your smoke detector; if you remove the growl from your dog, you have removed your best alarm system. Always listen to the growl, and never correct a growl. Some basic signs of stress are whale eye (white of the eye showing), lip licking, yawning, closed mouth, and face or body stiffness. Read your entire dog, not just the tail or face. If you see signs of stress it is time to advocate for your dog, remove the trigger, and/or your dog from the situation. When you're able to read the signs your dog is telling you, you will be better able to know when your dog is nearing threshold and needs a break.





Where do I start?

A great place to start is by learning about your dog.

1. Identify triggers (dogs, people, kids)
2. How does my dog react? (barking, lunging, lowers the head and becomes stiff)
3. How far away do I need to be for my dog to not react?
4. After my dog reacts do they recover quickly or stay at a high level?
5. Does my dog react to triggers the same way every time? If not what's different?
6. What body language does my dog show? (lip lick, stiffness, bares teeth)

What to expect from your reactive dog

If your dog is reactive to dogs, people, or kids (whatever is the trigger) then we are looking for them to be able to feel safe and control the impulse to react whenever a trigger is around, not to love the trigger. Don't make a goal of taking your reactive dog to a dog park, instead make a goal to take a walk around the neighborhood calmly. If your dog is people reactive, make it a goal to go to a public place with people and just observe the world. One of the best things your dog can learn to do is doing nothing.

You are a part of the rehabilitation

As you go through your day-to-day life with your reactive dog it can start to affect you as well. It can be isolating and defeating. You will have good and bad days, and while the good days can be so great, the bad days can be crushing. Remember to celebrate the wins, your dog looked at a dog 2 blocks away and didn't react-yay! All of those tiny wins can help you through the rough days.

So how do we deal with bad days? One thing to know ahead of time is it is ok if you are having a bad day already and you don't take a walk today; trigger stacking can happen to humans as well. If work wasn't great, the drive home made it worse, you get home to a bill in the mail you weren't expecting, today is probably not the day to train. When you are frustrated, anxious, or stressed that will all travel to your dog. When you see an oncoming trigger and stop breathing and tighten up on the leash, that does send your dog into reaction mode. Take time for yourself as well! You need to be calm so your dog can be calm. Remember to breathe! If you do have that bad day end on a good note. Once back home before entering your house ask your dog to sit, take it as a win, let the bad day go.

OK, I'm ready!

Let's start by talking about management first; this means not allowing your dog to rehearse the reactive behaviors over and over. The mailman scenario is one that most all dog owners are familiar with. It starts with your dog staring out the window seeing the mailman walking down the street going from house to house; as he approaches your house your dog lets out his biggest bark and growl to scare him away, and you know what? It worked! In your dog's eyes, they saved the family by scaring away the mailman. This is self-reinforcing behavior, so limit access as we desensitize to the mailman. Your dog does not need free access to the front window, use curtains, blinds, or something to limit the view. Use baby gates to your advantage, limit free access in the house. Muzzles help to remove the possibility of the bite, if trained properly your dog can love his muzzle. Having proper gear that will eliminate the possibility of your dog slipping their collar is very helpful; martingale collars tighten when tension is applied so your dog cannot back out of their collar. Head collars can be useful for large dogs that pull and lunge.



Let's take power away from the triggers!

A lot of dogs react because of fear; very few dogs actually want confrontation. The point of the reaction is to lower the risk of any contact by scaring things away. Does that mean your dog won't bite? No, it means they don't really want to. Your dog has basic fight or flight instincts, if your dog is on a leash you have removed the flight option, fight is all that is left. Many dogs struggle with barrier/leash reactivity because of this. If you start to use your leash differently your dog will be less likely to feel trapped. Always having tension on the leash will make your dog always pull back on the other end. Working towards getting a nice loose leash while you walk will help your dog feel better about being on a leash. Changing your dog's mind about triggers is done by a series of steps:

1. Be consistent (any trigger sight, sound, or scent without reaction gets rewarded)
2. Make your dog feel safe (don't put them in situations they feel they need to react)
3. Keep yourself calm (remember to breathe!)
4. Marking the behavior you want (click or yes good behavior)
5. High-value treats (real meat and cheese)
6. Removing the pressure (when things are good, it's time to end it, don't wait for the reaction)

So let's put all this together!

Example:

I want to take my dog for a walk, I check the time because I don't walk my dog when I know most of the neighborhood will be out walking theirs, fewer people and dogs lowers the chance of triggers. I grab my treat bag and some high-value treats. I pick up my leash and my dog gets super excited, running and bouncing around the house. I wait for my dog to calm down before I attach the leash. I ask my dog to down by the door so I can completely open the door, step out and then invite my dog out. I don't want to start the walk with an over-excited mind.

As we leave the front door my dog gets very excited again and begins to pull on the leash; I will start the walk with either figure 8's or 180 degree turns to encourage my dog to stay at my side and mark and reward when there is no pressure on the leash. Once we start our walk I will stop walking, or turn and go the other way when my dog pulls on the leash. I repeatedly let my dog take breaks by smelling things along the way.

I hear a dog barking inside a house as we walk by, I look at my dog and his ears are perked because he hears it as well, I mark and reward.

I see a dog two blocks away tied out in a front yard, my dog sees it as well, I mark and reward.

I turn to avoid the dog in the front yard and another dog is approaching on the other side of the street, I mark and reward.

To remove the pressure we turn and go the other way. Things are going well and then we take a corner and there is a dog much closer than I would like, to stay ahead of the reaction I mark and reward by tossing a handful of treats into the grass. As my dog eats the treats in the grass the trigger passes and my dog looks back at it so I mark and reward. While things are going well we head home.



Tips for success

- Training can and should be done in short sessions: 5-10 minutes a time a few times a day can make a huge impact on your dog's behavior.
- Always reward good behavior, don't overlook your dog if they aren't barking or reacting.
- Build the behavior you want, you will see more of what you reward, and less of the behavior you don't want.
- Don't forget to take breaks; your dog needs little breaks often to keep their threshold low.
- If you're making great progress, remember to step away before your dog reacts. Training will be less effective if it always ends in pushing your dog until they react.
- Always carry treats.
- Training opportunities are everywhere; mealtime can be training time.
- Enrichment! Keep your dog working mentally.
- Prepare for bad days; know you will have them and it is part of the process.
- Practice calm. Reactive dogs are usually drowning in anxiety. Give your dog a safe place and let them relax.
- Set realistic expectations.
- Study your dog's body language.
- Dogs love routines; do your best to set and stick to one.
- Dogs are not public property; it is ok if your dog does not want to greet someone.

What do I do now?

Annabelle's has multiple trainers that offer reactivity classes, so consider talking to a trainer. Fill out the survey on the next page and bring it with you when you meet your trainer.

Start documenting your dog, notice the language they are trying to communicate to you, and write it down. Mark good and bad days on your calendar.

Once you have a plan to start training, take notes on things you know will be important later, ask questions if you are unclear about something, enjoy the journey with your dog.

The problem behavior formula

My dog_(problem behavior)___ how can I manage this and prevent this behavior?

What can I replace this behavior with ___(alternate behavior)_____

What are the steps I need to take to achieve this new behavior?

Example:

My dog barks and lunges at guests in my house, I can replace this with sending my dog to place when guests enter my home. I can achieve this new behavior by teaching my dog place, and teaching him that place is a safe space to relax with his leash attached to his collar. I will practice this over and over before inviting someone over, making sure this is a reliable command. I will then invite guests over, let my guests know ahead of time my dog is in training, and ask them to not give my dog direct eye contact. I will keep my dog attached to his leash as I send him to place when guests arrive, and I can also have my dog wear a muzzle as a backup for safety. I will stay near my dog while he relaxes with guests in the house and reward him often.



My dog

- Triggers
- How does my dog react?
- How far away do I need to be for no reaction?
- Recovery time
- Same reaction every time? If not why?
- My dog's body language (circle all that you see)

Lip licking

Yawning

Whale eye

Stiff body

Stiff face

Tightly closed jaw

Very heavy panting

High tail

Low tail

Sniffing the ground

Avoiding looking at trigger

Only reactive on a leash

Staring at trigger(eye contact)

Growling

Barking

Lunging

- When you see a trigger approaching how do you feel?
- Do you tighten on the leash when you see a trigger?
- How can you lower stress for yourself when triggers approach?



Always remember:

Dogs that wear muzzles are good dogs!
Dogs that don't like to be greeted by strangers are good dogs!
Dogs that don't like other dogs are good dogs!
Dogs that don't like dog parks are good dogs!
Dogs that don't like kids are good dogs!

Every dog has a past and a story, know the story and thrive in the process of progress.

Don't stay in the past with them.

Don't let their story deter you from working towards progress.

Don't let being embarrassed by your dog's reaction stop you from taking them to a park.

Don't let setbacks stop the potential progress.

Don't let training you've done in past deter you from reaching out to a trainer.

Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Know that some days will be great.

Know that some days will be hard.

Know that there are so many people going through what you're going through.

Know that you don't need perfection to see progress.

Know that you'll make mistakes.

Know that your dog will make mistakes.

Know that trainers are here to help.

Know that trainers care.

Know that life doesn't have to feel so isolating with a reactive dog.

Know that it's ok if your dog barks in class.

Know that we've seen just about everything.

Amanda Ferris

R.E.S.C.U.E.

Dog Training

Rescuek9training@gmail.com

517-285-0118

Annabelle's Pet Station

517-599-0995



R.E.S.C.U.E.
Dog Training