

FINDING THE 'OFF' SWITCH IN A BORDER COLLIE

A common concern owners have about their collies is that they appear to have no 'off' switch and find it very difficult to settle or wind down, despite having had "loads of exercise". So I am going to look at this issue in more detail in this feature, as well as what might be done to give people calmer dogs to live with.

CHRONIC HYPER-STIMULATION

First, often what owners may label a 'crazy' or 'hyper' collie is just a dog who is being more chronically over-stimulated. It is important to understand that Border collies are dogs with exceptionally sensitive arousal mechanisms. Meaning it takes very little in the way of external sensory stimulation – particularly sound and movement, but also light – to trigger more active physical responses in them, which will then continue as long as the stimulation sources exist.

This level of sensitivity, in turn, is part and parcel of their whole inner wiring as sheepdogs, where they constantly need to be one step ahead, physically and mentally, of the livestock they control; always trying to out-think or outmanoeuvre them or anticipate what their next move might be, in order to counter-balance it well in advance with the right response of their own.

However, sometimes owners will read this ongoing responsiveness to any surrounding sensory stimulation as the sign of a dog, instead, who needs far more exercise to wear them out. So they then try to give them even more physical/mental stimulation in the way of exercise or ball games only to find that at the end of it their dog is even more 'buzzed' than before. Because what the dog actually needs is LESS sensory/physical stimulation in order to better wind down and not MORE. (More on this a bit later).

ADDICTED TO AROUSAL

It is also important to understand how quickly collies can become addicted to the state of higher mental arousal, because of all the feelgood neurochemicals that accompany this. So you may find yourself with a dog who is constantly trying to prompt you into giving them more physical/mental stimulation to better maintain this state of arousal.

A typical example of this may be a dog who comes back with you from a long walk, then goes straight to get a toy and wants you to keep throwing it for them. You may read this as a dog who is not yet tired enough, whereas I would read it as a dog trying maintain their higher state of mental arousal.

Conversely, some dogs may become more hardened self-stimulators; seeking out different sources of sensory stimulation for themselves, which is how many more obsessive patterns of behaviour – like constantly eyeing/chasing anything that might move – take off in them, and can then become increasingly more addictive or compulsive.

PUPPIES

Border collie puppies can be particularly easily over-stimulated, not just because of their increasingly higher energy levels as they grow, but also because they are yet to learn how to better check their own arousal levels, through more persistent impulse control exercises or training (covered before on this page).

Moreover the 'over-excited' mental state in a Border collie puppy is what then also triggers all the other less desirable behaviours like nipping or destroying things, as the pup constantly seeks some outlet or target on which to vent their excitement upon.

It must also be realised that Border collie puppies tend to be at their most 'manic' when they are most tired. And when this state is reached in a puppy they must not be stimulated any further. Rather, they should be put in a darker, quieter place until they are finally able to wind down again.

BREAKING THE AROUSAL HABIT CYCLE

If you are to have a dog with a better 'off' switch, in general, then several things need to happen. The first is improved training, as earlier highlighted, which teaches your dog to not only exert better control over their own emotional states/arousal levels, but to also find a more controlled mental state – as opposed to a more aroused one - far more rewarding.

The kind of both Focus and Impulse Control training you need to do with your dog to achieve this – as well as other basic Control exercises – are outlined in my book on training collies at the end of this feature.

For if you cannot get your dog to do basic things like lie down and stay down when asked, or go to their bed when asked, or stop doing whatever it is they are doing when asked, or be quiet when asked – instead of barking/whining etc. – you will always struggle to own a calmer dog.

ROUTINE AND 'UP' AND 'DOWN' TIME

Another crucial factor in owning a calmer collie is establishing a more set routine of 'up' and 'down' times during the day, from puppyhood onwards. For if your dog learns that at roughly the same times every day there will be physical/mental exercise on offer (e.g., walks, training, play) and at other times there will not, this makes it that much easier for them to train their minds to rest during the non-activity times.

Conversely, greater unpredictability and uncertainty about what will happen and when in their lives makes dogs more restless and stressed, and thus far less likely to settle.

Also get out of arousal-prolonging habits like throwing toys for your dog during periods – such as after a walk, or during the evening – when you really need them to settle instead.

THE STRESS FACTOR

Some collies are less able to settle because they are carrying particularly high stress loads, which can be common in rescue dogs, or suffering from greater sensory over-loading. The same factors can also make many collies far more phobic or reactive in their daily behaviour. They may also be more likely to indulge in increasingly obsessive behaviour patterns as a coping mechanism.

Dogs like these may need greater time to return their minds to better balance, and dogs suffering from greater stress/sensory overloading may also benefit from a special Sensory Detox programme I have devised for collies with such issues. This appears in BOOK THREE of my BREED APART trilogy on BEHAVIOUR. All you need to know about training collies from puppyhood onwards – including focus, impulse control training and wider control training – appears in BOOK TWO – ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILLS & LEARNING.

Collieology

Carol Price collie books: In the UK from: <https://performancedog.co.uk/.../boo.../authors/carol-price/> In the USA from: <https://www.dogwise.com/#> and https://www.cleanrun.com/.../border_collies_a.../index.cfm In Canada from <https://www.4mymerles.com/product-category/books/> In Australia from: <https://gameondogs.com.au/> And in the Netherlands and Belgium from: <https://mediaboek.nl/border-collies-a-breed-apart-book-1.htm>