

Leash Reactivity Management and Behaviour Modification

Part 1 - Management

Management is imperative to ensure that the dog does not continue to rehearse the reactive behaviour, which can be highly rewarding. We start with identifying any potential opportunities for the dog to react – this is taking a full look around at our day-to-day routine and opportunities even when at home where the dog may feel the need to react and act out on that behaviour. Here are some guidelines:



In the home

Remove any opportunities in the home for the dog to practise reactivity. Close the blinds, cover glass doors or put up visual barriers to prevent the dog from being able to look out of windows or doors. Do not allow the dog to patrol the fence in the yard. When you are not at home or able to actively supervise the dog, they should be crated or kept in a room without a view of the street. If the dog reacts to strangers, put the dog in a crate in another room when visitors first come in the home.

Avoid congested walking routes

Find walking areas where you won't be encountering other people or dogs. If you live in an apartment building, where reactivity is common in hallways and the elevators, timing walks to avoid running into other dogs in the hall or elevator is important. Some dog owners will speak to their neighbours, explaining that they are working through reactivity, and find out when they commonly walk their dog so that they can time their own walks to not coincide. It can also be friendly and helpful to let neighbours know in advance that if you happen to meet in the hallway by chance, you will be executing an emergency U-turn to gain space for your reactive dog, and to not take it personally. Finally, it can be helpful to carry a Kong stuffed with a very high-value soft and lickable treat (peanut butter is a favourite) or a very high-value squeaky toy or tug toy to distract the dog while you move away to gain distance. Think of these as emergency management tools to ensure your dog is not exposed to a trigger when they are over threshold and undo your careful desensitization plan, which follows below.

Enrichment

Make mental stimulation an important part of your dog's daily routine. Rotate toys and research DIY puzzle feeders and enrichment ideas to keep your dog busy when you are not at home. Spend a few minutes every day training your dog, even if it's just simple tricks or reviewing your foundations skills.

Equipment

Choose equipment that helps provide better control, like a front clip harness, so that you can feel confident of physically managing your dog's behaviour. If you feel like you can't control your dog,



they may very well pick up on your nervousness and start to feel nervous themselves. It's therefore important to make sure that you feel in control even if the worst of situations was to present itself. A head halter like the Halti or Gentle Leader or a no-pull harness like the Easy Walk can make a significant difference in our ability to maintain our composure, although be aware that many dogs will need to be introduced gradually to a head halter by pairing it with pleasant experiences. A great resource on conditioning a dog to wear a head halter is here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwakterNyUg>.

Choke chains, prong collars, extension leashes and pull harnesses should be avoided as pain and discomfort will increase the dog's aversion to the situation.

Foundations skills

Away from distractions and chances of reactive encounters with a person or dog, practice teaching the dog to look at you (eye contact), "sit," "down" and walking without pulling on a leash. These basic foundations skills also help your dog during your behaviour modification plan as they have a history of reinforcement and practice in doing these basic obedience skills. When taught with a positive reinforcement method, these skills are classically conditioned to trigger a positive emotional response in the dog as opposed to a negative one.

Once you feel that you can effectively keep your dog on a loose leash and that they are engaged and happy walking with you on a loose leash, you can begin working on the behaviour modification part of reducing leash reactivity.

Part 2 - Behaviour modification

Intentional set-ups done sub-threshold

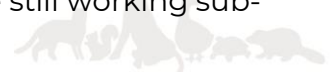
Find a park with plenty of dogs and people and determine at what distance your dog starts showing a reaction. You'll want to find a place where you stay sub-threshold; in other words, where the dog can see the people or dogs, but can still respond to the simple cues you have taught them and stay relatively calm.

Click when dog notices trigger

Anytime the dog looks at the trigger (person and/or dog), click, then give them a treat as outlined in the Engage/Disengage Protocol (www.cpdogtraining.com). We want to change the dog's emotional response to the trigger by pairing it with something pleasurable.

Bridging the reward marker

After a few repetitions done at a distance where the dog can see the trigger but not react to it, you will notice that your dog starts to look at the trigger, then automatically looks at you expecting a treat. This is called bridging the reward marker. At this point, you can start clicking and treating your dog for looking away from the trigger and paying attention to you. Remember, you are still working sub-



threshold, which means you are allowing your dog to notice the trigger at a distance where they can see it but not react to it. If your dog is reacting to the trigger, you are too close and must move farther away to effectively train through this protocol.

Decrease distance

Once the pattern of the dog looking at the trigger, then looking at you, is consistent, it's time to go on to the next step. You can move a little closer to the trigger while still staying right under threshold. When the dog looks back at you, click, treat, and walk away a few steps. You can also wait for any sign of relaxation, like a sit, a down, a head turn, or a sniff to the ground and walk away with a loose leash and a happy but calm demeanor. After a few seconds, you'll go back in position and wait for the next dog or person to walk by and repeat the sequence. Keep these training sessions short.

Generally, training sessions should not exceed more than 15 minutes per session, although that will vary from dog to dog. If you see any signs of escalating stress in your dog, such as out-of-context panting, increased vigilance, whale eye or rictus grin, aroused tail or piloerection or forward-leaning posture and prolonged direct stares at the trigger, end the session and start again another day.

Change will occur through repetition, as long as you are able to manage day-to-day interactions and keep your dog under threshold (see the suggestions above for avoiding situations where they will become reactive due to proximity). You should gradually be able to decrease the distance to the trigger(s). The pace at which you'll be able to make progress is dictated by the dog's ability to relax at every step.

Keeping a log

It can be helpful to keep a log detailing distance and direction of approach that you update from day to day. Different angles of approach can mean a higher level of intensity of the trigger, even at a previously achieved distance (i.e., head-on approaches are more intense than angled or meandering approaches). It's often a good idea to start your desensitization work at an angled or meandering approach as opposed to a head-on approach. So, a training log might look like this:

Day	Distance and reps	Angle
Day 1	100 ft – 10 reps	90 degrees (left and right)
Day 2	90 ft – 10 reps	90 degrees (left and right)
Day 3	80 ft – 10 reps	90 degrees (left and right)
Day 4	50 ft – 10 reps	90 degrees (left and right)
Day 5	100 ft – 10 reps	Head on
Day 6	70 ft – 10 reps	Head on
Day 7	100 ft – 10 reps	From behind but 20 ft parallel
Etc. until you are at a comfortable distance from all angles		

Through this process of systematic desensitization and counter conditioning, if we manage everyday interactions carefully and execute a well thought out training plan, we often see a very wonderful reduction in the amount of reactivity that our dog displays. While it may rear its ugly head from time to time if the dog is caught by surprise and put over threshold (think about times when you may have jumped or vocalized when you are startled – dogs can startle too!), generally with careful and deliberate exposure the reactivity becomes a thing of the past. This can take time as behaviour tends not to follow a straight line in a flow chart, as much as we want it to.



Different factors in the environment can affect how a dog feels from day to day so it is important to not be discouraged or give up. With consistent application of training, we do see a difference and often are able to completely treat the reactivity or at least greatly reduce it.

How long does it take?

Depending on the level of severity the dog displays and how long they have been practicing the reactive behaviour, the time it takes to see drastic change can vary. Even then, there will be instances where we find ourselves simply managing situations in which our dogs are over threshold, using distraction techniques as outlined above, especially if we live in dense urban environments. It's important to note that dogs with severe aggression may need to be managed carefully for the rest of their lives by carefully limiting exposure to triggers that may cause aggression. As well, supplemental interventions may be appropriate, depending on the level of aggression the dog has displayed in the past. However, for most dogs exhibiting simple leash reactivity, desensitization and counter conditioning, coupled with management, generally yield great results.

