

UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH REACTIVITY VOLUNTEER INFORMATION SESSION MAY 2020

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AGENDA

- Understanding reactivity – what it looks like and why it happens.
- Recognizing body language of reactivity and aggression.
- Modifying the behavior
 - Management
 - Training

UNDERSTANDING REACTIVITY

- All living things are reactive – just means they respond to stimuli in environment.
- What varies are triggers and thresholds.
- Reactivity is normal dog behavior.
- But, doesn't feel good to dog or handler.



UNLABEL ME!

- Behavior is communication.
- Behavior is responding to the environment to get one's needs met.
- Behavior is not “good” or “bad.”
- Behavior continues because it works.
- A dog is NOT his or her behavior.



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY REACTIVITY?

Staring

Freezing

Mouth closing

Whining

Pulling

Head up

Body forward

Muscle tension

Barking

Lunging

Growling



WHAT MAKES DOGS REACTIVE?

- Fear?
- Anxiety?
- Frustration?
- Poor socialization?
- Genetics?
- Poor social skills?
- Ambivalence?
- Excitement?



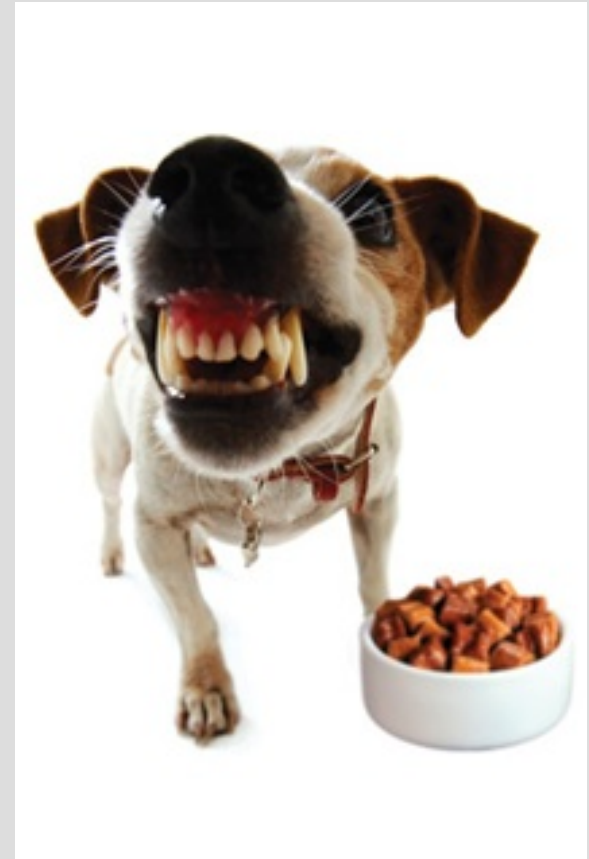
- Since we can't ask them, we need to look at the context and the function of the behavior.

ABC'S OF BEHAVIOR

- Antecedent: context, what happens right before the behavior occurs
- Behavior: observable thing that happens
- Consequence: what happens next in the environment
- If a behavior continues or grows stronger, the consequence has reinforced it.
- If a behavior decreases in frequency, the consequence has punished it.

WHAT NEED DOES REACTIVITY MEET?

- Usually considered a “distance-increasing” behavior
- Barking/lunging gets the “trigger” creating the discomfort to move away
- Even for the “frustrated greeter,” the removal of the source of stress is reinforcing (which we know because the behavior continues to happen in similar contexts)



ABC'S OF REACTIVITY

- Antecedent: what triggers the reaction
- Behavior: bark/lunge/growl/etc.
- Consequence: trigger moves further away

A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- Not appropriate social behavior – other dogs may rightfully take offense.
- Dogs that are social off-leash often behave differently on leash or behind barriers.
- Dogs (and all of us) often show their worst behavior with the people/environments they feel safest.
 - This does not necessarily mean they are being “protective.”
 - This does not mean it is that person’s fault.
 - Reactivity/aggression does pose a risk of retaliation from trigger – safest to do if the dog has “back up.”



FRUSTRATED GREETERS?

- “He just wants to play so bad. He loves other dogs.”
- Being friendly with members of your species and being socially anxious are NOT mutually exclusive.
- Reactivity is not pro-social behavior.
- Even social animals, when highly aroused, can make bad decisions.

WHAT IS POSSIBLE?

- Genetics and early development play a role in temperament – it isn't just “how they are raised.”
- Temperament may “set the boundaries,” but training and environment can move the line.

BODY LANGUAGE

THE PROGRESSION OF AGGRESSION

Reactivity is part of a continuum of distance-increasing behavior which can escalate into aggression.

Aggressive behaviors escalate from subtle to impossible to ignore.

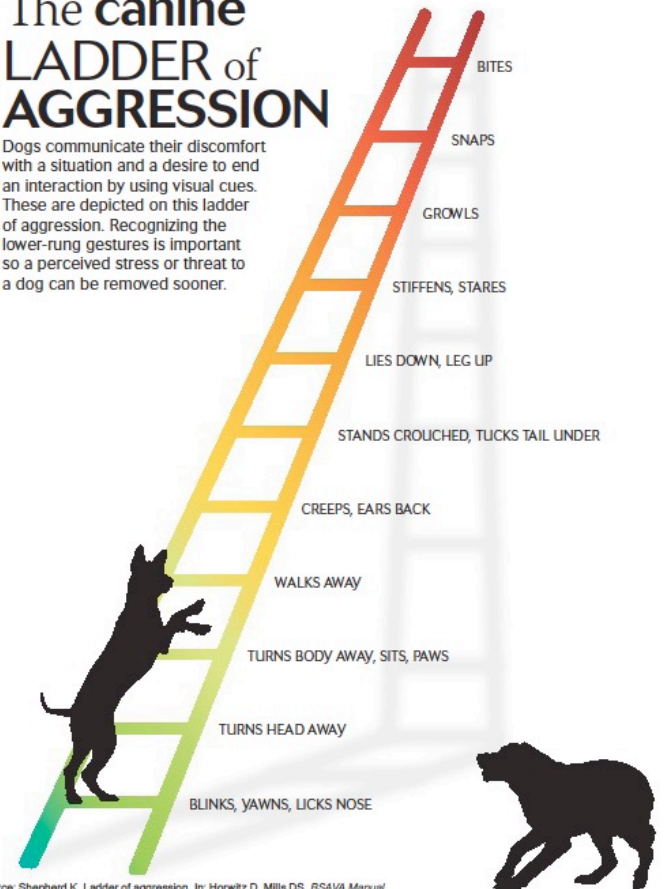
Addressing the dog's needs early can halt/reverse progression.

Punishment can remove rungs causing the skipping of non physical warning signs.

Punishment cannot move a dog back down the ladder because the dog's needs have not been met.

The canine LADDER of AGGRESSION

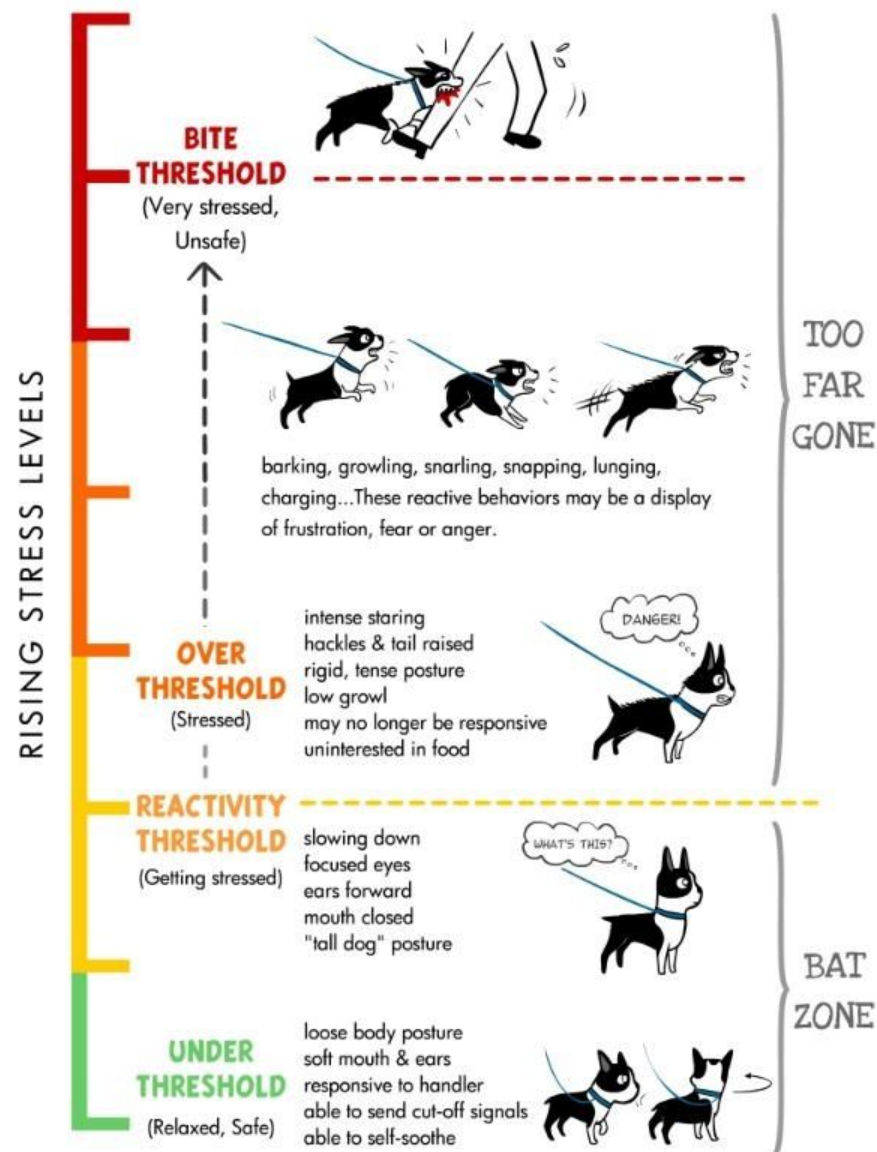
Dogs communicate their discomfort with a situation and a desire to end an interaction by using visual cues. These are depicted on this ladder of aggression. Recognizing the lower-rung gestures is important so a perceived stress or threat to a dog can be removed sooner.



Source: Shepherd K. Ladder of aggression. In: Horwitz D, Mills DS. *BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine*, 2nd ed. 2009.

REACTIVITY CHART

WHEN DOG ENCOUNTERS A TRIGGER



MODIFYING REACTIVITY

THREE KEYS TO CHANGING REACTIVITY

- Reduce overall stress
 - Environmental management, enrichment, calming aids
- Prevent rehearsal of undesired behavior
 - Environmental management
- Train new responses
 - Training/behavior modification

REDUCING STRESS

IMPORTANCE OF A “STRESS VACATION”

- “Trigger Stacking” – stressors are cumulative and ability to cope breaks down.
- Dogs need three days after a highly stressful event for cortisol levels to return to baseline.
- Animals can’t change associations when already in a state of fear/anxiety.

ENRICHMENT

- Reduces cortisol levels
- Creates feeling of empowerment – being able to effect change in the environment and influence consequences
- Can be an alternate activity if other sources of exercise increase stress or exposure to triggers.
- Sniffing especially linked to relaxation in dogs – encourage activities that use their nose (sniff walks, nose work, scatter feeding, snuffle mats, etc.)

CALMING AIDS

- OTC supplements
- Thundershirts or anxiety wraps
- Body work (T-touch)
- Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP or Adaptil)
- Calming Caps
- Through a Dog's Ear
- For severe and/or generalized anxiety, anti-anxiety meds may be appropriate.

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

MANAGEMENT: SETTING THE ENVIRONMENT

- The more a behavior is practiced, the better the animal becomes at it and the more it will happen.
- As we train new desired behaviors, we need the old ones to fall out of practice.
- Want to keep dogs below the threshold of exposure where they will start to react.
- Need to reduce exposure/intensity to help dog succeed
 - Increase distance
 - Minimize visual or audible stimulation/exposure

MANAGEMENT IN THE SHELTER

- Kennel placement
- Real life rooms
- Visual barriers over kennel
- Shelter breaks
- Foster placement

MANAGEMENT ON WALKS

- Choose routes and times of day that are less busy.
 - Pick least-busy trail, side trails
 - Off-site walks
 - On-leash walks in upper play yard
- Pick locations with good lines of sight, ability to move to the side and avoid tight passes.
- Cross streets, change directions, use parked cars/bushes/snow drifts/etc. to create visual barrier, increase lateral distance.
- Ideally, walk dog on harness
 - Tension on neck increases arousal.
- Double points of attachment/walk with another volunteer
- Don't be afraid to ask for space.
- Avoid lower yard!!
 - Leave leash attached
 - Leave yard if fence running begins

WHAT ABOUT PLAY GROUPS AND GROUP HIKEs?

- Maybe/maybe not
- Not going to “cure” or fix reactivity
- Not appropriate if sets up condition for extended rehearsal of reactivity or other inappropriate social behavior
- Not appropriate if results in continued elevated level of stress hormones
- Dogs that are dog-social may enjoy them, but those that are anxious around dogs will benefit more from other enrichment activities.
- Unfair to the neutral dogs and can cause their behavior to decline.

MODIFYING BEHAVIOR

WHAT DO DOGS NEED?

- Safety, predictability, and choice.
- New options.
- Gradual desensitization and counter-conditioning: Change negative associations to positive ones.

TRAINING NEW OPTIONS

- Dog should be “under threshold” during training – can increase challenges as dog is successful
- “Look At That”: Engage then disengage; take in information about the environment calmly and move on.
<https://youtu.be/MmYjZKYbGf8>
 - With neutral stimulus: <https://youtu.be/chc4tZl4Mmg>
 - With another dog: <https://youtu.be/CZgAuKTUVp0>
- “Find It”: Triggers appearing cause a fun tracking game to start.
https://youtu.be/dyh_3XYpIlw
- Hand Target: move dog away from trigger, get focus on you.
https://youtu.be/B_ZRWjOCB5k
- Turn and Go: Make a quick U-turn when a trigger is too close for comfort. https://youtu.be/XDc6j6Z_9-E

THE ENGAGE-DISENGAGE GAME


A training game for dogs who are FEARFUL, ANXIOUS, or FRUSTRATED around a specific trigger such as another dog, person, or sound. The goal is to first decrease the dog's fear/anxiety/frustration and then to teach the dog a new safe and appropriate behavior to do instead.

- PREP:**
- ☐ High value treats
 - ☐ Clicker (or verbal marker)
 - ☐ Humane harness or collar
 - ☐ Practice fast u-turns by luring your dog with a treat on his nose, or tossing "find-it" treats on the ground as you both walk away quickly in the opposite direction.
 - ☐ Take a break if you see subtle stress signals (displacement behaviors) such as excessive lip licking, yawning, or scratching.



PLAY FOR 1-5 MINUTES. TAKE A BREAK. REPEAT.

LEVEL 1: ENGAGE




- 1**  Start at a safe distance away from the trigger, where your dog is not reacting. Be quiet and still so your dog notices the trigger on his own.
- 2**  At the precise moment your dog ENGAGES by looking at the trigger, CLICK!
- 3**  When your dog turns his head towards you after the click, feed a treat.
If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.

LEVEL 1 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row at the same distance before moving on to LEVEL 2. A successful repetition is when your dog immediately turns back to you after the click.

If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, keep playing LEVEL 1 until your dog has calmly looked at (or engaged with) the trigger from every direction. Then move on to LEVEL 2.

LEVEL 2: DISENGAGE

- 1**  Let your dog notice the trigger again, but now wait 1-5 seconds to see if he will offer to LOOK AWAY from the trigger on his own.
If your dog is fixating on the trigger for longer than 5 seconds, GO BACK to LEVEL 1.
- 2**  At the precise moment your dog DISENGAGES by looking away from the trigger, CLICK!
- 3**  After the click, feed a treat.
If your dog reacts or is not turning back to you after the click, move further away from the trigger to reset at an easier distance.

LEVEL 2 GOAL:

To do at least 3-5 repetitions in a row before moving 1-5 steps closer to the trigger. A successful repetition is when your dog comfortably disengages with the trigger on his own.

As you move closer, keep playing LEVEL 2 if the trigger is not moving or changing in intensity. If the trigger is moving or changing in intensity, go back to LEVEL 1 at the new distance.

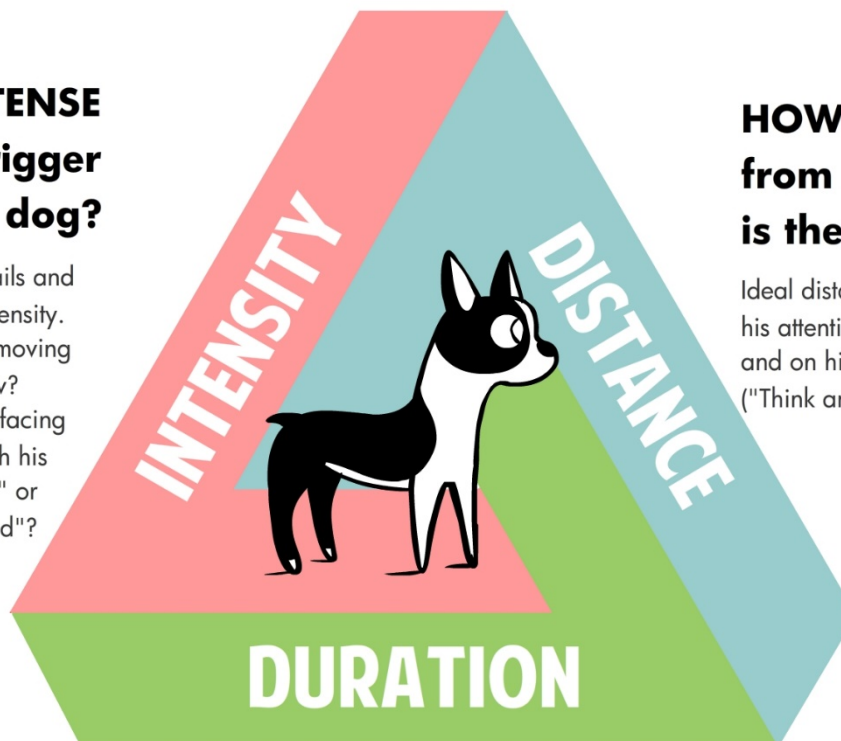


CHANGING ASSOCIATIONS

- Exposing dog to a “trigger” at a low enough intensity that the dog perceives, but does not react.
- Good things happen *every time* they are exposed to the trigger.
- Gradually increase intensity as the dog is ready.
- You are not going to reinforce reactivity if dog does start barking.
 - The function of the reactivity is to get distance, not food, so food is not going to reinforce it.
 - If anything, you are reinforcing a lesser response and shaping reduced reactivity.
 - By changing the emotional response to a positive one, the behavior will change also.
 - That said, attempt to keep dog under threshold at all times and change environment if dog is not successful.

HOW INTENSE is the trigger for the dog?

Consider details and
adjust the intensity.
Is the trigger moving
fast/slow?
Is the trigger facing
the dog with his
"blunt end" or
"pointy end"?



HOW FAR AWAY from the dog is the trigger?

Ideal distance: the dog can split
his attention between the trigger
and on his handler
("Think and Learn" zone)

FOR HOW LONG will the dog be asked to deal with the trigger?

Ideal duration: depends on intensity and distance.
When in doubt, keep it brief, listen to what your dog tells you.

Trigger is TOO INTENSE = increase distance + shorten duration

Trigger is TOO CLOSE = decrease intensity + shorten duration

Dealing with Trigger for TOO LONG = increase distance + decrease intensity

via Suzanne Clothier article on "Understanding Thresholds":
www.suzanneclothier.com/the-articles/understanding-thresholds-its-more-under-or-over

AVOID AVERSIVES

- Punishing a dog for reacting may suppress a particular behavior.
- But, dog's needs have not been met – they still feel the negative emotion, which now is probably even worse.
- Communication method has been taken away, leaving only option to go further “up the ladder.”
- Like talking the batteries out of the smoke detector.
- Relies on dog practicing the unwanted behavior in the first place – be proactive instead.



SO WHAT DO I DO WHEN THE DOG REACTS?

- Stay calm.
- Offer good things – you will not be reinforcing bad behavior, you will be creating a better association with the trigger.
- Help dog get out of situation.
- Recognize training moments vs management moments.



IS IT EVER “FIXED”?

- All animals will react to some stimuli in the environment.
- Any behavior that has been practiced previously is more likely to happen again in the future.
- Goal is to raise the threshold that it takes, making events much less likely to occur.

KEY POINTS:

- Use management to help the dog be successful.
- Reduce stress by providing opportunities for choice, natural behaviors, and enrichment.
- Work where the dog is at and be patient.
- Use positive reinforcement training and desensitization/counter conditioning to improve responses to triggers.
- Avoid methods that rely on force, coercion, pain, or discomfort.
- Be respectful of the neutral dogs.

TRAINING RESOURCES

- Books:
 - Fired Up, Frantic, and Freaked Out by Laura VanArendonk Baugh
 - Feisty Fido by Patricia McConnell
 - Behavior Adjustment Training 2.0 by Grisha Stewart
- <https://dogsinneedofspace.com/>