

Relaxation Protocol-Overview

Email from Angela; January 20, 2021

Head Start Volunteers,

For those of you looking for some more ideas of things to work on with the HS dogs, Dr. Overall's Relaxation Protocol might be a good option.

Dr. Overall is a veterinary behaviorist who came up with this protocol years ago (and has updated it since) to help dogs relax during a wide range of stimuli. The protocol is made up of 15 "days" (though you won't necessarily make it through it in only 15 days). Each day consists of a few dozen steps, which essentially look like a "stay" exercise; however, it is NOT a stay exercise. Staying is not the point – relaxation is.

You will have the dog sit or lie down, and then do the things listed in the steps. These may just be having the dog sit for various durations of time, or you might be stepping away and returning, talking out loud, making sounds, etc. The tasks start out very brief and easy, and get harder over time. Sample tasks might look like:

- Have the dog sit for five seconds.
- Have the dog sit while you take one step back and return.
- Have the dog sit while you clap your hands softly.
- etc. . .

You can reward the dog between each step.

When the dog can get through all the steps in a day while staying relaxed the whole time, then you move on to the next day. If the dog struggles with some of the tasks, stay at that day until the dog can make it through calmly.

Again, this is NOT a stay exercise! We aren't really worried about whether the dog maintains the sit or down, but rather, that they are calm, and essentially "grow bored" of the weird things going on in the environment. If the dog gets up, I just calmly re-cue them to sit in the original location again, and keep going. Over time, they realize that

all the stuff going on in the environment is irrelevant, and if they just hang out in a certain spot and chill out, reinforcement will be delivered.

There is a blog that has recorded all the steps into separate audio files that you can download, so all you have to do is play the file and do what the lady tells you. Reward between each step. I like to have the dog on a mat or blanket as a target location when I do this, but it isn't necessary. You can find those files here:

<https://championofmyheart.com/relaxation-protocol-mp3-files/>

I have also attached the written protocol from Dr. Overall's textbook.

Here is an example of me working on the first few minutes of Day One with a dog here:

<https://youtu.be/lwAVNhgLOYw>

At times she gets up and follows me when I move, and for the longer intervals she gets a little antsy. That's fine – I just re-set her without much fuss. I would stay on this day until it is easier for her. It also doesn't matter if she is in a sit or a down, though she does stay sitting. If she could not make it through the entire day (they tend to be about 8 minutes or so), then we can stop and try to get farther the next time.

This is often used in working with separation anxiety and noise phobias, or dogs that tend towards anxious and who get easily over-aroused by various stimuli. In the shelter, I think good candidates for this would be long-stayers, and/or dogs that get easily over-stimulated or are highly anxious, but feel free to do it with any of them. You can work on this in their kennel, a yard, or the temp test room if it is available.

Let me know if you have any questions. If you want coaching, feel free to grab me sometime when you are in, or take a video and share with me for feedback. Thanks!

-Angela