



Reactivity Guide

I think we have all been in the situation where we feel embarrassed because of our dog's reactivity. I know I certainly have. If you think that this is just how your life is now, walks filled with anxiety hoping not to see a trigger, then I'm here to tell you there is hope for you yet. By now you have probably looked up a lot of information, looked at a lot of trainers, racked up the hours on YouTube trying to get fixes, whilst every step along the way has been conflicting information.

'You can't teach an old dog new tricks' is quite literally nonsense. I've trained dogs that have been 11yrs old and reacted all their lives, that now have pleasant walks for the first time. The only real issue is, why did they leave it 11yrs? I can assure you that every dog can be improved.

What's missing? A plan of action, a guide to start you and your dog on the right path to success and I'm willing to share it with you for free.

Step 1

Damage Limitation denotes methods and strategies put in place to reduce the likelihood that a dog will react when exposed to triggers. This requires management from you the owner, to proactively control the environment to the best of your ability, so your dog cannot rehearse and reinforce their reactive behaviour. This is not a way of life and damage limitation is just the first step. Here are some ways we can do this.

Reduce exposure to tiggers: Avoiding situations where you may encounter a trigger (dogs, people, vehicles Ect) This reduces a negative response and allows you to train and build better behaviour. An example would be changing your walk, so you don't go past the dog paddock.

Creating stress free environments: Crate training is underutilized. This provides your dog with a calm relaxing environment for when you can't supervise. We will use the example of barking at people out the front window. The use of a crate instantly stops this behaviour when you are not with the dog meaning your dog cannot rehearse this.

Effective use of equipment: Leads, collars, muzzles, harnesses are all there to aid us and our dog in tricky situations. Try using a house lead. I will use the barking out the window example again, now you have the lead on in the house you can prevent your dog from reacting to external stressors.

Gradual exposure: Slowly increasing exposure to tiggers at a distance where preferred behaviours can be obtained. Pushing boundaries too soon can produce negative reactions. If your dog is dog reactive, find a distance where your dog is comfortable in the presence of their trigger. Slowly build confidence then gradually reduce distance.

Overall Goal for step 1. Create an environment that allows for learning and improving behaviour that lay foundations to help us succeed with your dog's reactivity.

Step 2

Building motivation: If you won the lottery tonight, would you go to work the next day? The likelihood is no, you wouldn't. What is a lottery win for our dogs? They have their food, water & toys readily available, why would they need to do anything for you, they already have everything they need.....

Quick easy wins

Put all toys away. No free access to them. A dog willing to play by themselves doesn't need you. Don't worry play will soon be introduced properly.

Don't feed sh*t food. Go to this website to see the nutritional value of the food you have. www.allaboutdogfood.co.uk if its below 65% look for something ideally above 75%.

Hand feeding: Take your dog's daily allowance of food and use that while training to reinforce good behaviour. No more food in a bowl for the time being. Food is your dog's prize for displaying good behaviour. Start in neutral ground, your house or garden, then once you are ready, progress to different environments.

If your dog won't take food from you try the following.

1. Bowl feed. Don't leave the bowl down all day. If your dog doesn't eat straight away pick it up. Do this until your dog eats without hesitation.
2. Slow feeder. Same as above.
3. Place the slow feeder inside a cardboard box laying down. Adds a complexity to build engagement to food.
4. Now try hand feeding.

Step 3

Building Behaviours: Below are the 4 key skills that you want to start working on.

Heel walk/Loose lead walking: Using a lead and collar teach your dog to walk calmly by your side. This keeps arousal low in potentially stressful situations. Start in the garden.

Place command: Train your dog to go to a designated place. This command is designed to give your dog a job while stationary. Over time, train around something desirable to train your dog's impulse control.

Recall: Build a reliable recall around distractions ensure your dog comes back at all times around different distractions.

Disengagement: Ensure your dog disengages from triggers (in other words turns away from triggers i.e dogs, people). Hand feeding will help with this.

Step 4

Bring back Play: Personally play with your dog. This should involve the following.

Learn to play properly.

Tug of war: Pulling games can be effective.

Chasing: use a toy to encourage chasing. Ball on a rope.

Contest: Make these games competitive and controlled. Finish these games before the dog is bored. This ensures the dog is eager for more.

Step 5

Real world application: 30 mins before your walk, schedule in a play session. After this play session allow your dog to settle for 10mins before you go out on your walk. Gather all equipment needed; lead, collar, food ect.

Walks are no longer just walks. From now on they are training sessions. On your walk, work on the 4 key skills, starting with disengagement to get their attention on you. Spend 10 mins on each key skill.

After successful training sessions, gradually increase the difficulty of the training. (add more distraction)

TOP TIP

Create a ranked list of places from easy to hard, your home or garden is likely to be the easiest & going to the country park could be the hardest. This is completely dependent on you and your dog. Get at least 5 from easy to hard and slowly work through them. But don't rush, remember the tortoise beat the hare!