ONE TAIL AT A TIME
DOG RESCUE | PDX

Dog-Led Decompression: Your Dog's First Week in Your Home

Resources for Foster Guardians and Adopters

What is dog-led decompression?

Decompression is a gradual adjustment to a new environment following a major life event such as surrender to a shelter or rescue. We watch dog body language to assess stress levels during this time. Learn to read dog body language so you are prepared to help your dog decompress.

- We recommend that you watch this video: Dog-led decompression: Your dog's first week in their foster or adoptive home

Decompression — read these first:

- Don't Stress, Decompress • Old Dog Haven
- Five Things to Focus on with Your Newly Adopted Dog — Dogminded - Modern Dog Training
- *These are the most important links! Read them!* ☺

Body Language:

- Understanding your dog's body language | The Battersea Way - YouTube
- Body language of fear in dogs
- Canine ladder of communication - PDSA

How long does decompression take?

Every single dog is different. It may take days, weeks, or even months for dogs to settle in. Your dog's body language will be your best guide. There is no "normal" time frame!

Why do dogs need to decompress?

Major life changes such as being surrendered, transport from another state, sheltering, and moving to new homes are all ***extremely*** stressful for dogs. That stress manifests itself in different ways. Some dogs sleep a lot; others bounce off the walls and don't sleep enough. Dogs that are allowed to decompress at their own pace are less likely to have undesirable behavior, less likely to run away, less likely to get sick, and more likely to get adopted as efficiently as possible.

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How do I prepare my home for the arrival of a new dog?

- Dog-Proofing Your Home: A Room-by-Room Guide · The Wildest
- Secure hazardous materials, trash cans, and irreplaceable items.
- Set your dog's crate up in an out-of-the-way but not isolated part of your home. The crate should have soft, cozy, washable bedding and should be covered on the top and sides by a few blankets to create a sound-dampened area.
- If your dog is stressed by pedestrian traffic outside of your windows, draw the blinds and close windows when you are not home.
- Gather important supplies like collar, identification tag, harness, leash, toys, chew items, bedding, bowls, enrichment feeders, high-value treats, food, poop bags, non-toxic cleaning supplies, baby gates, and medications if needed.
- Be prepared to stick to a schedule. Predictability reduces stress.
- Play soft music or white noise to drown out any scary new sounds that your dog may not be familiar with.
- Know where the quiet places are in your neighborhood to give your dog potty breaks and walks (especially important if you don't have a yard).
- Make sure that you have a way to separate your decompressing dog from other animals and human children. Your new dog may not want the company of others at first.
- If you have more than one dog, make sure that all toy and chew items are put away at first and only given under supervision until you are sure neither dog will guard resources.
- Make sure your yard and doors are secure. Dogs should be leashed at all times when outside and invest in a few baby gates! If you have a baby gate, use it at the entry/exit point of your home. A baby gate will not necessarily prevent an escape, but it will slow a dog down if there is a lapse in management. Your doors should always be closed and secure — baby gates are just backup protection. If you have a baby gate, use it.
- Cover your furniture if you are worried about shedding.

How do I keep my new dog safe during decompression?

Dogs in new homes are often flight risks. It is crucial to take extra steps to secure new dogs. If your dog is just entering OTAT foster care, your dog MUST have a martingale collar with an OTAT identification tag. This could save your dog's life in the event of an escape. Your dog must be on leash at all times when on walks and the leash must be double clipped to both the harness and collar. Foster dogs must be crated when you are not home, unless told to do otherwise by OTAT. ***Do not*** take decompressing dogs to dog parks or crowded public places (farmers' markets, food carts, the beach, restaurant patios, any hiking trails, etc).

How should I interact with my decompressing dog?

- How to Greet a Dog Safely: Do's and Don'ts - YouTube
- Petting Consent Tests movie - YouTube
- How to greet a dog and what to avoid (infographic)
- For the **first three days**, your dog must be able to rest and sleep as much as they need.
- Select an area of your home where your new friend has a choice between being with people and the other members of your household or being on their own. It is all about respecting each other's space. If your dog chooses to hang out by themselves for a while it is important that they have that choice!
- It's important that the dog solicits attention and petting from you, as opposed to you touching, petting, or picking them up because you want to. Giving them this choice is crucial for building trust and confidence. If your dog approaches you soliciting attention or petting, pet them on their chest or shoulder for 3 seconds and then stop. With their body language, are they asking for more petting? Are they saying no thank you? Remember, body language can be subtle.
- Do not invite guests over to meet your new dog for at least one week. The most important thing for your dog will be to continue bonding with you or someone else in your home, not your neighbors or friends.
- Keep in mind most dogs do not like close physical contact like hugs. Most humans like hugs; dogs do not. Always respect their space and let the dog decide how close they want to be. Allow time for trust to build. Every dog is an individual and will take their own time to feel comfortable in their new environment. Sitting or getting down on the dog's eye level makes humans more approachable.
- Establish rules for good contact and bad contact that all members of your household will follow. A general rule of thumb is to keep any petting below the mouth line. Under the chin, the chest, and the sides are safe areas for most dogs. The best time for petting is when the dog moves closer and relaxes.
- Just as important as safe petting practices, do not allow anyone to pass their hand over the dog's head or back. These types of hand movements can be very scary depending on what your new friend was exposed to in the past. If the dog moves away, they are sending a signal that should be respected as a sign they need more space.

How should I introduce my kids, dogs, and cats to my decompressing dog?

If you have other dogs, it's best to do introductions one at a time and outside if possible. Dogs can get tense around doorways, gates or in narrow spaces like hallways so it's best to avoid these for introductions.

- Introducing your dog to the family | Blue Cross
- Stay safe around the dogs you know: a guide for kids (infographic)
- How to Introduce Dogs | Best Friends Animal Society

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Kids:

- Home - Family Paws Parent Education | dog and baby
- Family Dog Trainer - Peace of Mind for Parents with Dogs - Pooch Parenting
- Stop the 77 - The Family Dog

Cats:

- How to Introduce a Dog to a Cat | Best Friends Animal Society
- How to introduce a dog and cat | Animal Humane Society
- How to introduce cats (tutorial)

Potty training:

Even if a shelter, rescue, or foster home told you your dog is completely potty trained, do NOT assume that he will know where to go at YOUR house. Remember that accidents are likely.

- Potty training for dogs and puppies (tutorial)

Crate training:

Crates facilitate potty training and keep puppies safe for short periods of time when you cannot supervise them. Here are some resources for crate training:

- Step-by-Step Guide to Crate Training Your Dog - YouTube
- Crate training tips for dog and puppies (tutorial)

What activities are appropriate for my decompressing dog?

- Let your dog rest and sleep as much as they want to without being disturbed. Try to keep the house quiet.
- Provide calming activities, including frozen Kongs or West Paw Toppls, lickimats, and snufflemats. Licking is calming.
- Provide enrichment feeding — every single meal should be an opportunity for your dog to sniff, scavenge, and forage. Put food in cardboard boxes for them to shred. Scatter food on the floor. Roll it up in a towel.
- Enrichment for dogs and puppies (tutorial)
- What is a Decompression Walk? - YouTube
- Decompression walks - What are they? - YouTube

Shape behavior with positive reinforcement:

Avoid the urge to train lots of cues the first week. Try these techniques instead for getting your decompressing dog to behave in a desirable way.

- SMART X 50 Training Game - This Concept Breaks the Mold! — Wildwood Canine
- Hand Targeting - YouTube
- “Find it” — say “find it” and then toss a treat on the ground. This will teach your dog to use his

nose.

- Capturing Calmness- how to train calmness in dogs - YouTube
- Building Confidence in Dogs (youtube.com)

My dog is showing significant signs of fear, anxiety, or stress even though I followed all of the advice here. What should I do?

If you encounter major problems or need further assistance, please contact your adoption counselor or OTAT's training team at training@otatpdx.org if you are fostering a dog. If you have adopted a dog, please see a trainer. Select from this extensive list: Humane Portland Metro Area Dog Trainers and Behavior Professionals.

Recommended YouTube Channels

Dog Training by Kikopup
Chirag Patel
Success Just Clicks
Train Me Please
Mim Coward
Michelle Stern
Cooperative Care with Deb Jones
Instinct Dog Behavior & Training
Sarah Walsh - Dog Trainer
Family Paws, LLC
Happy Hounds Dog Training
Grisha Stewart Academy of Dog Training & Behavior
Jenny Efimova
Dogs That
Summit Dog Training
Synergy Veterinary Behavior
Behavior Vets of NYC
Calm Canine Academy

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with your animals/animals in your care before using any advice or information with or for any animal.

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