Reactivity

What is Reactivity?

Reactivity is a heightened and emotional response to certain stimuli (dogs, people, cats, cars, bikes, strollers, kids, wildlife, etc.). The cause and intensity can vary greatly, but it is often referred to as leash or barrier reactivity.

Why Do Dogs Become Reactive?

- **Building frustration**: Humans created leashes and barriers, so dogs are not able to naturally interact with their environment which creates frustration (barking, whining, lunging).
  - This can prevent excited dogs from wanting to greet and interact => frustration
  - This can prevent insecure dogs from feeling autonomous => frustration
- **Tense meets**: Dogs out on walks are often forced to greet other dogs and people face to face. Face to face greetings in a dog's world can be seen as confrontational and be anxiety inducing.
- **Fearful defense:** For shy dogs, reactivity can be defensive, a way of keeping scary stimuli away

Reactivity vs Dog Aggression

- Dogs who are not allowed to meet dogs over time while on leash will often become frustrated and begin to vocalize. Over time, this frustration can build, and dogs can start to display intense lunging, growling, and snarling at others.
- While intense reactivity can look and sound scary, it is not necessarily aggression…
  - Dogs who display leash reactivity and barrier frustration can be very social with other dogs when off leash.
- Reactivity can also be due to under socialized and selective behavior towards dogs which can be aggressive. Therefore dog to dog meets should be handled with care.

Walking Equipment Recommendations

- **Be Proactive:** Reactive dogs can be difficult to control on leash and choosing the right equipment (leash, collar, harness, halter) can make all the difference!
- **Harnesses:** For strong pullers, a great tool is a "no pull harness" like the Easy-Walk and Sensation Harness. For strong, reactive dogs, "head halters" such as Gentle Leader and Halti are fantastic choices.



Easy Walk harness



Gentle Leader



Sensation harness



No Pull Freedom harness

- **Keep It Pain Free:** Avoid choke chains and pinch/prong collars as these can cause pain and injury. The pain may result in negative associations with dogs and people that they pull towards, creating and even worsening reactivity.

How to be successful with a reactive dog:

- Teach **focus exercises**, such as "watch me" and "find its", in low distraction areas, then slowly move to areas with more distractions to practice.
- When other dogs (or other things) are approaching, give high value treats. So, other dogs = great things (aka **positive association**)
- Set the dog up for success by working with them when they are "under threshold" (not hyper-focused, barking, lunging, etc). Move away or avoid high traffic areas.
- Use **conflict avoidance techniques** to minimize reactive episodes, including U-turns, body/item blocking, banana walk. It's important that your dog doesn't continue to practice reactivity. The more he practices, the stronger the behavior becomes.
- **Relax yourself**! Often owners of reactive dogs are stressed and tense themselves. This transfers to the dog and can create more tension and make it worse. Work on deep, steady breaths and consciously releasing tension from your body.
- **Practice keeping the leash loose**. Tension on the leash is a huge trigger for some reactive dogs. Work on keeping it loose and light in your hand.
- **Be mindful not to punish your dog for reacting**. Harsh words/tone of voice, leash pops, other forms of physical punishment can make matters worse. A dog who is punished for their reaction is reinforced that they are in fact reacting to something terrible. The terrible thing (human, dog, car, etc) is causing pain and fear so they will make the negative association.

Shifting Associations from Bad to Good!

While training behaviors can help build confidence and teach your dog how to control their impulses around things that may react to, desensitization and counterconditioning are key to help a reactive dog change their response.

Often, when dogs develop a strong reaction to a stimulus, it triggers an emotional response. Just like with people and a phobia, a strong emotional response can feel like a knee-jerk reaction difficult to change. You feel you absolutely cannot control your body's reaction. When a dog is reacting, they are likely experiencing something similar – an emotional and physical reaction. Desensitization and counterconditioning are great ways to help a dog overcome the frustrated emotional and physical response.

To learn more about helping your reactive dog, contact *Underdog Academy* for a complete step by step training program.