



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

- This is a companion resource guide to an OTAT video tutorial on decompression. We recommend that you watch the video [Dog-led decompression: Your dog's first week in their foster or adoptive home](#)
- [Doggie language](#) (chart)
- [Body language of fear in dogs](#) (chart)
- [Don't stress, decompress](#) (article)

How long does decompression take?

Decompression is a process and dog decompression rates vary from dog to dog, but here is a general guideline for average dogs:

- **DAYS 1-3** are the most stressful. Dogs need to rest and sleep as much as they can.
- **DAYS 4-7** are still very stressful, but dogs will seek out attention and toys more while sleeping less.
- **WEEKS 2-3** It is appropriate to start teaching cues with positive reinforcement training and okay for dogs to start taking longer walks.

Why do dogs need to decompress?

Major life changes such as being surrendered, transport from another state, sheltering, and moving to new homes are **extremely** stressful for dogs. 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.

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

- Secure hazardous materials, trash cans, and irreplaceable items. Read [Dog-proofing your home: a room-by-room guide](#).
- 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

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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.
- Consider diffusing lavender or [dog-appeasing pheromone](#) throughout your home to help dogs feel calm and safe.
- Gather important supplies like collar, identification tag, harness, leash, toys, chew items, bedding, bowls, enrichment feeders, high-value treats, food, non-toxic cleaning supplies, baby gates, and medications if needed.
- Be prepared to stick to a schedule. Predictability reduces stress.
- Play [soft classical music](#) (video) or [pink 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 foster 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?

It is common for decompressing dogs to experience so much fear, that they may want to run away. It is crucial to take extra steps to secure new dogs. If your dog is just entering OTAT foster care, you MUST put a martingale collar with an OTAT identification on your dog immediately. 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.

- [Securing Your Dog Safely in the Car](#) (article)
- [How to use a martingale dog collar](#) (video)
- [How to double clip your dog for walks](#) (video)
- [Double clipped dog walking gear](#) (diagram)
- Make sure your home is secure so your new foster or adoptive dog can't escape if frightened. Read [Door darting: how to stop a dog from running out of the door](#)
- [Step-by-step guide to crate training your dog](#) (video)
- [Crate training tips for dog and puppies](#) (tutorial)

How should I interact with my decompressing dog?

- For the **first three days**, your dog must be able to rest and sleep.
- 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!
- [How to greet a dog and what to avoid](#) (infographic)
- Watch the dog's body language for signs that they enjoy being pet. Do not force petting on a stressed dog.
- 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.

- [Stay safe around the dogs you know: a guide for kids](#) (infographic)
- [How to introduce dogs](#) (tutorial)
- [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)
- [Potty training a puppy to go outside](#) (video)

- [Remedial house training for adult dogs](#) (article)

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 lighting soft and the house quiet.
- [Enrichment for dogs and puppies](#) (tutorial)
- Veterinary visits and gentle grooming.
- Short walks in quiet parts of your neighborhood using the [Walking with Regard technique](#).

Shape behavior passively 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.

- [Luring dogs](#) (video) to places and positions
- [Capturing calm](#) (video)
- Reinforce good behaviors that the dog is already doing. Use happy praise and treats when your gets things right, even if they did it accidentally.
- [Teach your dog their name](#) (video)
- Teach the [target cue](#) (video). You can use the target cue to gently interrupt any undesirable behaviors. Just be sure to redirect your dog immediately after to a more desirable behavior. For example, if your dog is barking excessively, interrupt the barking by asking your dog to target, then give them a chew toy instead. When your dog tucks into chewing the toy, praise them heavily for doing so.

My dog is showing significant signs of fear, aggression, or stress when left alone 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](#).

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