



Why is my dog reactive toward people or other dogs?

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In understanding reactivity in dogs, we need to first understand that dogs exhibit a behavior because they get a benefit from it. By determining the benefit, you may be able to assist your dog in reducing their reactive behavior. The most common reason for reactivity is our dog's own self-confidence or lack thereof.

Lack of proper socialization at a young age is also part of the equation. Knowing we, as their guardians, are ones to be trusted by offering predictable leadership behaviors to them is key. Working with a reward-based trainer, one who specializes in reactivity in dogs is essential. This trainer needs to have extensive training in reading body language and controlling stressed based impulse behaviors. (See trainer recommendation handout)

Here are things you can do, right now, to help your dog.

Remove all pressure from your dog's neck when walking them.

Choke chains, pinch collars and other neck restrictive collars can actually create reactivity in dogs. One of the first and most important things we can easily do to help a dog feel more secure is to remove pressure from the dog's neck. Even the slightest pressure on the neck restricts breathing. In the moment of a fearful or anxious encounter (and this can include just looking at another dog or person), a sensation of choking or not being able to breathe only heightens the anxiety. In addition, one leash contact to a collar on the neck is not the most effective way to rebalance a dog that is pulling, straining, or leaning forward. The use of a Gentle Leader with a second point of contact on a harness removes the possibility of constant tension on the neck and helps us to bring the dog back into a position of balance on all four feet. The Gentle Leader also allows us to encourage the dog to avert his eyes or slightly turn his head away from another dog (which is a calming signal to the other dog) with a very small signal. It is extremely important to know that choke chains and pinch collars can also cause permanent damage to your dog's trachea and muscle structure. The purpose of these types of collars are to give a physical correction to the dog when they do the wrong thing (pull on leash, break a command etc.) the problem is that physical correction also instills a sense of fear in your dog. Since they cannot trust what they fear, corrections can change the relationship we have with our dogs.

Relax

It is important that the handler not react to the dog's reactions. This is not always easy if it is your own dog! Maintaining a calm, confident, and neutral emotional state when working with a reactive dog can greatly influence the dog's emotional state. Releasing tension from your body and being aware of your own balanced/neutral pelvis position makes you much more effective in the event the dog does react or suddenly pulls you toward the other dog.

Know your dog

There is a distance your dog can be from the trigger at which they do not react. This may be a football field, but there is a distance at which they are not showing signs of stress. Keep this distance constant when you encounter a trigger. If you are walking your dog and your dog is reactive towards other dogs and you see a person/dog team approaching, say nothing and quickly turn and go in the other direction. This shows your dog you have taken control of the situation. Reward your dog when they are calm and relaxed. You may need to walk your dog early in the morning or late at night to minimize the triggers.

Do not react to your dogs reactivity

If your dog goes off on a trigger and you reprimand, yell, tug, pull or otherwise react to your dogs behavior, you are feeding the problem. Prevention is your best tool, until you can work with a trainer to learn behavior modification to reduce and eliminate the issue.

