



Mat Relaxation Protocol

What is the picture of relaxation? Loose and relaxed mindset + body position (down and on a hip, laying on their side, or stretched out) on a specific mat.

Teaching your dog how to play or get rowdy is fun, right? It is! We probably find ourselves playing, running and chasing, or simply creating excitement with our dogs daily. It's all fun and games in the moment, but not so much when you come across a situation where your dog turns on their arousal state and has a hard time coming back down to earth. The good news is, you can teach your dog how to relax! Yes, your dog can learn how to "turn off" their excited mindset. Teaching an on and off switch is helpful for any dog, but especially reactive dogs.

Preparation: You will need...

Quiet Space	Find a nice quiet space in your home to practice the first few sessions. Somewhere without any disturbances or distractions.
Management	Have your dog on a leash to prevent escaping the session. Keep it as loose as possible. It is there to help manage the situation.
Special Mat	This mat is only to be used for relaxation. We want to teach your dog that when they see this mat come out, it means relax time! It's important to also put this mat away and out of sight when you aren't practicing. <i>*Note: this is different from the "Place" Behavior! See troubleshooting below.</i>

Low Value Reinforcement	We don't want to use high value reinforcers (chicken, cheese, etc.) since this may cause excitement. Try using your dog's kibble or other lower value foods.
Calm Owner	<p>Since dogs are social animals, they will feed directly off what you are doing/how you are feeling. For your dog to practice relaxing, you must also place yourself into a relaxed state of mind:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Slow breathing - Relaxed posture - Sitting on the floor with your dog - Refrain from using markers like "yes!" or the clicker. Instead try "that's nice, good work" in a low volume + calm tone - Slowly delivering the treat between their paws - Periodically gaze around the room versus staring directly at your dog's eyes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - - Light and gentle petting or massaging the dog's body is encouraged only if this helps calm your dog instead of create arousal

Practice

Step 1)

Even if your dog knows the down behavior on command, you still want to lure your dog into the down position. This takes the tension off performing behaviors correctly, since our only goal is to go into relaxation mode.

Step 2)

Try to lure your dog into a hip roll. Having your dog lay on their side or hip is setting your dog up for a more relaxed state versus being in a sphinx position ready to pounce or get up.

Achieving this position can be a bit difficult for some dogs at first (as well as what environment they are in and how close their triggers are) but take it slow.

Reinforce increments of the behavior. Also begin placing your treat in the area where your dog's body forms a "C" shape while in the hip roll. *Some dogs prefer to "pancake" or "sploot"* meaning they are laying on their bellies with their legs stretched out behind them.

Refer to the pictures below



Lily is in a hip roll position. Treat placement at the arrow (In the “C” shape) will help keep her in this position. Gentle and calm petting may also induce a more relaxed state, or more aroused state. If more aroused, reduce or stop calmly petting.



Lily can see other reactive dogs, but notice how relaxed she is here! Laying on her side while in the laps of her parents is helping to reduce her chances of an eruption.

Step 3)

Slowly deliver the treat between their front paws while calmly talking to your dog. You can say things like “Nice job, this is good” or “You’re doing great”. Remember, we want to refrain from saying our marker word “yes!” or using a clicker to help decrease excitement levels.

Step 4)

Keep reinforcing the relaxation behavior, slowly delivering the treats. You can eventually start to build duration by intermittently reinforcing every few seconds and so on.

Step 5)

Release your dog with their release word, and give them time to do something else: explore, engage in play, sniffing etc. You should also release yourself from sitting.

Step 6)

Go back to the area you were practicing the relaxation protocol and see what your dog chooses to do. Give them time to *choose* to come to you and lay back down. If you do not prompt them to do so and they make the choice voluntarily, that is huge! Your dog is showing you they are consciously making the effort to come back and practice.

Once you have practiced numerous times in the quiet house, and you feel that your dog has built a solid foundation of relaxing on their mat indoors, it's time to also work on outside

sessions. This is what we call working with the “Three D’s” of training: Distance, Duration, Distraction.

Step 7)

Take your relaxation practice out into the real world. Get distance from your dog’s triggers to keep them under-threshold while practicing. Each session may look a little different, and that’s okay. Try to keep the session as relaxing as possible, and your dog successful. You may always practice inside for maintaining the behavior.

Troubleshooting during a session:

Indoor Sessions:

Your dog is pulling, whining, going left and right, offering a bunch of behaviors like sit, shake, roll over. Of course, that is not practicing relaxation. Keep your own calm state and remember ugly face/voice or irritation will only hinder your dog’s progress (these social creatures are feeding off your energy!) Let your dog problem solve and figure out what works! If you reinforce or acknowledge the behaviors above, they will repeat. We want them to choose the down position and relax. You may redirect every so often to help them if they are becoming over-aroused or frustrated.

Outdoor Sessions:

Process the environment in which you are practicing and think of how you can keep your dog successful; create distance from the trigger and/or find a more relaxing area. You may need a higher value reinforcer while outdoors to combat with your dog’s triggers. You might also need to reinforce at a quicker rate while your dog’s triggers are around.

If your dog begins pulling, whining, going left and right, etc. now is the time to redirect into the down position (lure). You must make this choice for them before they go over-threshold. Staying in this position and reinforcing relaxation is the goal.

Be vigilant of the moments before a reaction may occur and get to work on keeping your dog relaxed!

Teaching the “relaxation on a mat” behavior is not the same as teaching a “place” behavior

While both may utilize a type of mat, the behaviors themselves are very different.

“Place” means “Keep all 4 feet on the bed and stay there until told otherwise”

- “Place” is a boundary
- It can be an elevated bed, your dog’s regular bed, a mat, a towel, etc.

- Steps to the behavior include
 - Sending to “place” from a distance.
 - Increasing your own distance away from your dog on “place”
 - Adding in distractions like balls bouncing, opening the front door, etc.
 - Building duration of the behavior by having your dog on “place” while you eat, watch tv, have guests over, cook dinner, etc.
- Your dog can stand, lay down, sit, spin in circles, or be on their backs while on “place”, they just cannot break the boundary. Meaning, they can also be excited while on “place”.
- The “place” mat or bed may be left out all day/night and used by your dog as they would like. However, when you say “place”, the place rules are set in.

Relaxing on a mat

- The dog should always be lured into a down on this mat, for ease.
- The dog should be laying down, and eventually can pick a hip or completely lay on their side.
- Excitement should be kept very low, the goal is relaxation.
- You are always right by your dog and relaxing yourself. This is not a time to work on increasing your distance away and leaving your dog.
- This mat you have specifically chosen goes away when the session is over, and only comes out when it’s time to practice relaxing. Keep this mat different from your dog’s “place”.