



## LEASH *Reactivity*

### ARE YOU A MEMBER OF THE MIDNIGHT DOG WALKERS CLUB?

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When you take your dog for a walk on a leash, and you see another dog, does your dog proceed to lunge, bark, thrash about, and generally go berserk? If so, you are probably a member of The Midnight Dog Walkers Club. The described behavior is called leash reactivity and can vary and fluctuate in any number of ways. Leash reactivity is more prevalent than most people realize. Many owners with dogs that suffer from leash reactivity are confused by the behavior and are of the opinion that it is unusual, or that they have a uniquely “bad” dog. If you are a member of this club (which we also often refer to as Leash Lungers Anonymous), take comfort in knowing you are not alone, there is hope, and you do not have a bad dog!

The confusing paradox of leash reactivity is that a very high percentage of dogs that react while attached to a leash are not, in fact, dog aggressive, even if it may look that way in the moment. Many leash reactive dogs can, and do successfully socialize and play when they are OFF leash. The barrier and restraint of the leash often exacerbates the reasons that can cause reactivity:

- **Fear-** Go Away, Go Away! Please give me space!
- **Frustration-** Hey, come back here! I’m DYING to play with you!
- **Past Experience-** Other dogs= Bad
- **Punishment-** Other dogs= Pain
- **Genetics-** Most dogs have some reactivity due to their natural survival instincts and territoriality.

Behavior is driven by reinforcement, so for whatever reason, your dog is leash reactive because it’s working for him. For owners, it is embarrassing, scary, and stressful to see their dogs behave in such a crazy, aggressive looking manner. It’s often an emotional and baffling experience for everyone involved. For many people walking their dog eventually becomes so stressful and unpleasant, they stop walking their dogs altogether. When dealing with leash reactivity, it is important to remember that this is behavior modification work, which is never linear, and there is no quick fix or magic pill. ***It is imperative to understand and remember that your leash reactive dog is not giving you a hard time. On the contrary, your dog is having a very hard time.*** Oftentimes, that single change of perception sets dog owners on the path to success.

Just like people, dogs can have extreme anxieties, fears, post-traumatic stress, etc. Most of us can empathize with these kinds of emotions and disorders, and just like anxiety in people, leash-reactivity is not something that typically completely extinguishes. However, with management, training, patience, and

empathy, it can get a whole lot better and eventually you can give up our Midnight Dog Walkers Club membership.

Here's the deal: Leash reactivity is always progressive and the more we practice anything, the better we get at it. There is a good chance your dog has practiced reacting so often that he has become an expert! Not only that, but now it's his habit. We all know It can take months to make or break a habit.

Your goal is to prevent your dog from rehearsing the undesired behavior, introduce a desired behavior, and perhaps most importantly, change the emotional response. Stop concentrating on what you don't want and start teaching your dog alternative behaviors and games so you can communicate what you DO want. It is possible to help your dog make different choices and change stress cues to calm cues.

The primary goal is for you and your dog to have a less stressful walk by preventing the dogs from going over- threshold. That doesn't mean they will never bark or become stimulated when they see another dog. After all, they are dogs not robots.

What does it look like when your dog goes over-threshold? It can be different for every dog, but we often say it's when they have "gone to Mars." A majority of the time we see over-the-top lunging, barking, whining, thrashing about, etc., but it's not always that clear. Most of the time we can gauge a dog's threshold (or critical distance) by whether he will eat treats and is able to follow basic cues. However, there is the rare dog who will still eat and work but is clearly overly stimulated and having a very negative emotional response. You know your dog best and if there is any indication your dog is over threshold, or headed in that direction, you are too close to the trigger! Distance is your friend! And of course, if your dog is anywhere near Mars, never ask them to perform basic cues. If you are having an anxiety attack, or even on the verge, I would never ask you to do a math problem!

### ***What You Need:***

- A hungry dog that has ideally gotten out some energy with exercise or mentally enriching games.
- A well fitted harness with a leash connection on the chest and back. (Freedom or Balance) and/or a head collar (Gentle Leader or Comfort Trainer).
- A 6 ft standard or hands-free leash (No Bungee or Flexi leads) and a 10-20 ft. longline for separate Decompression Walks (aka Sniffaris). (See our Behavior Blueprint and YouTube video: Decompression Walks)
- Super-duper delicious, high value treats that your dog never gets except during the walk. Variety is a must and as much as possible, feed all meals during the walk.

### ***During the Walk:***

- Never, ever allow dog to dog on-leash greetings! (See our Behavior Blueprint: Why You Should Say NO to On-Leash Greetings)
- Creating distance will always help. Decipher your dog's critical distance; at what point does your dog begin to react? Or, how far away from the other dog must he be to stay under-threshold? Don't wait for your dog to start reacting before redirecting him. Know the triggers, anticipate that your dog will react, and constantly be aware of your surroundings. *Interrupt before he erupts!*
- If you get caught off guard and your dog goes over- threshold, don't try to re-direct, just get out of there and create distance as quickly as possible.
- Stay positive, practice calm persistence, and understand that this process is a marathon, not a sprint.

- Give your dog tons of positive feedback and encouragement. With a reactive dog, especially in the early stages, you don't have the luxury of being a boring owner that doesn't interact with their dog during the walk. Put your phone away and work on strengthening the "psychic bungee cord" that connects you and your dog. If you don't feel like a happy, jolly, fool, you're not doing it right!

***Work on these cues and behaviors:***

- Sit & Down- it is always good practice to stop and reestablish connection and calm down (figuratively & literally)
- Strengthen the Psychic Bungee Cord- Work to keep your dog's attention on you while another dog walks by at a distance. As long as eyes stay on you, the treats keep coming. It's an OPEN BAR!
- Checking In With You- Anytime your dog turns his head and checks in with you, reinforce like crazy!
- Look at That!- Looking at the other dog results in delicious things!
- Engage/Disengage- Looking at the other dog and then looking back at me results in even more delicious things and happiness!
- Emergency U-turn/ Get Out of Dodge- Make this a super fun game!
- Go Find It! - Toss treats on the ground to redirect attention. This can be a stationary or mobile game.
- Hype Up/ Settle Down- Practice settling down quickly from a semi hyped up state. Chasing the Flirt Pole and structured Tug are great easy to incorporate Hype Up/ Settle Down.
- Mat Relaxation- Condition relaxing on a specific mat. (See our Behavior Blueprint: Mat Relaxation).
- Nosework- One of the best ways to redirect a dog's brain! Let your dog sniff and smell as much as possible! Create a nose-work game by hiding treats along the walk. Use natural and manmade items like tree trunks, water meters, steps, etc.
- Pawcore- Use natural and manmade obstacles to jump on, go over, go under, etc. These exercises build confidence and are a fun redirection for your dog.

You must initially practice everything as much as possible with no distraction in order for your dog to be good at them when there are big distractions!

Finally, it is important for owners to be aware of their own behavior when their dog is reacting on leash. Are you tensing up on the leash, yelling, yanking, punishing? Have you also developed a habit? If I could interview your dog, would he tell me that you were a great owner except for the fact that you freak out and react every time you see another dog walk by? Reactivity is contagious.

If we want our dogs to be calm, we must learn to be calm and know that punishment methods, or anything that causes pain, fear, or intimidation, will only make things worse, never better. With a plan that includes patience, consistency, management, and training, leash reactivity can and will get better. It is entirely possible to reduce the frequency and intensity. Will it get perfect? No. None of us will ever do anything perfectly. Will it happen quickly? Probably not. Will some days be two steps forward and the next day be one step back? Of course. With leash reactivity, every baby step is huge, and your dog doing nothing is everything! If you calmly persist, you will reach a point where you won't dread walking your dog anymore and your relationship will be all the better for it. Don't give up and remember to BREATHE!