

Desperately Seeking Snoozing

How to Help Your Dog Relax

Excited, exhausted

It might seem that it would take voodoo, or something similar, to teach unruly, out-of-control and/or overly enthusiastic dogs how to be calm and relaxed. For people who live with dogs that fall into these categories, there can be a good deal of frustration and anxiety; more often than not, these dog guardians are frazzled from searching for the "calm zone."

Owners of excitable dogs often feel as though they have tried everything to slow down their dogs—watching TV dog trainers, reading books, watching YouTube videos, hiring trainers, experimenting with different equipment, and more. Most of the time these efforts yield little to no success. Even professional dog trainers can feel overwhelmed if they have never had to put together a training plan for a dog that is "over the top," a dog that could be in jeopardy of losing his/her home. These trainers might also feel as though they have tried everything in their bag-o-tricks of obedience behaviors.



While living or working with dogs that are out of control, hyper, or "crazy" is not an easy undertaking, teaching those dogs skills to help them relax is a lot less work than you might imagine. It takes an understanding of some basic dog behavior, balancing exercise and rest, and investing a concentrated effort toward acceptable behaviors with the "calm zone" as the final goal.

Getting through the layers

Many dog professionals talk about realistic expectations when they are trying to problem-solve a behavior issue, but it goes much deeper than that for dogs that are reaching into the outer limits of exuberance.

Understanding your dog's needs is a multifaceted process. Each layer needs to be examined before you try to set training goals for your dog.

When considering a training and behavior modification program it's important to think about what is "normal" for the age and breed of the dog. For instance, expecting a border collie to be a couch potato at the age of 15 months is like asking a Formula One driver to slow down during a race—neither is likely to happen.

Beyond realistic expectations there are many other considerations, including the amount of time you have to devote to working with your dog to overcome the impulsive behaviors. A medical clearance to ensure there are no underlying medical problems that might be driving the unwanted behaviors is also important. Consider your dog's diet, and what, if any, exercise (both mental and physical) your dog receives—these factors are also parts of the picture or puzzle. All of these issues need to be examined before you jump in and put training plans in place, as each can play a role in helping or preventing success.

To finalize your plan you will also need to understand the role your dog plays in a household, (family dog, working dog, performance dog, wife or husband's dog, etc.). Can the dog's main caretaker enlist the cooperation of other family members, or at least get a non-sabotage agreement among those in the household? If there are other people in the home, can the family maintain the management the situation requires? All of these considerations must be examined and addressed in the quest to help a dog "chill out."

When you have looked at all the relevant issues that you can change or factor in, it's time to begin the foundation work that will direct your dog toward the "calm zone."

Mental exercise



Discovering ways to exercise your dog's mind is just as important to overall health as physical exercise. Many excitable dogs are simply bored and are looking for ways that help to stimulate their brains. Unfortunately, what they discover are often the very behaviors that drive humans crazy.

Dogs are thinkers, and it's a shame to waste their minds. Finding things for your dog to do that help to promote good brain health will not only keep your dog's mind active and healthy, but will also help tire him out. Using food carrier toys, such as Kongs, to feed your dog his meals so that he has to work for his food, or puzzles where food is hidden in compartments, will result in a more emotionally satisfied dog.

Something as simple as tossing your dog's food in the yard, or putting it in a sealed cardboard box, can provide fun that will satisfy your dog's innate need to scavenge and hunt for food. After all, just because people provide pet dogs with food every day doesn't take away the dogs' natural foraging nature.



Physical exercise

The amount of physical exercise that is suggested for dogs ranges. While it's often thought that physically exhausting dogs is one way to slow them down, moderate exercise might be best. This study points to the fact that, at least in mice, animals' ability to learn can be reduced by too much exercise. Since

you need a thinking dog to teach calmness, this is something to consider.

It is important is to find the right balance for both the mental and the physical exercise needs of dogs. If you feel like you are wearing yourself out trying to meet your dog's exercise needs, think about slowing down. Adjusting intense physical exercise to more of a conditioning and maintenance level is a way to start finding balance. A good rule of thumb is 15-20 minutes of structured play two times per day. Be sure to choose structured play rather than mindless play, like fetching a ball over and over. Examples of structured play include earning ball-playing time, hunting for food or food-carriers in the house or yard, and a variety of K9 Nose Work games. Brisk walking/light jogging supplemented by mental exercise, such as training or the use of food carrier toys/puzzles, is another good combination.

Other thoughts about your dog's exercise needs:

- Be alert to the possibility that you might be training your dog to become more out of control if every time he acts bored and becomes annoying or destructive you try to get him more exercise. It doesn't take long for a dog to figure out that his annoying behavior results in fun activities and attention from you! With that in mind, try to stay ahead of your dog's needs by giving him physical and mental challenges before he acts out.
- Guard against the risks associated with taking a dog for infrequent runs, playing an intermittent game of fetch, visiting a dog park only occasionally, or injuring a dog that is young and still developing bone and muscle. These infrequent but high-energy activities all have the potential to stress your dog's body. Stay within a dog's normal limits or begin a more rigorous exercise program that slowly builds endurance and muscle, rather than opting for exercise that might add to the overall problem if your dog is fatigued and using muscles only occasionally. Think about how sore you would be if you tried to run a mile and had not done so for years!

- Dogs that are engaged in high-level physical activities every time they leave the house often miss just enjoying "smelling [the pee on] the roses." It's a sad waste of dogs' sensitive snouts if they never get to enjoy exploring the world with their noses because they are constantly moving.

Rest and sleep

Like kids, when dogs don't get the recovery time their bodies need, they may be more cranky, more irrational, and not as cognitively alert as they need to be for working through impulse issues. In fact, not getting enough downtime might create some of problems in the first place. According to the book *Stress in Dogs*, by Martina Scholz & Clarissa von Reinhardt, the most well-behaved dogs sleep or rest 17 or more hours per day. If your dog is not getting enough of both sleep and rest, consider finding more ways to help your dog recuperate his body daily.

Giving your dog things to chew that last for a long time, such as pressed rawhides (get really big ones), raw marrow or soup bones, bully sticks, and stuffed Kongs, are all good choices that maximize resting. Be sure to supervise a dog that is chewing, at least until you know your dog's chewing style.

Along with engaging in training sessions geared toward calming and relaxing your dog, consider your dog's diet.

Diet

Excessive barking, mood swings, restless sleep, compulsive disorders, reactivity, aggression, hyperactivity, and biting can all be symptoms of a poor diet. Along with engaging in training sessions geared toward calming and relaxing your dog, consider your dog's diet. If your dog's unwanted behaviors have an underlying diet-related reason, training your dog to relax may be met with only limited success.

To avoid this type of roadblock, take time to do your homework about your dog's food. If you are feeding a commercial diet, look for a diet without grains (corn, wheat, and soy, specifically) where the first 2-3 ingredients are meat products. Also consider enhancing that diet with fresh food, such as meat and vegetables.

Supplements

There are several supplements that have been shown to improve brain health, but always check with your veterinarian before adding a supplement to your dog's diet. Omega 3 fatty acids, like those found in fish oil, are known to improve brain health, with the added side benefit of a glossy coat. When comparing supplements, look for higher concentrations of EPA and DHA to maximize the effects.

L-theanine is a supplement that increases the body's gamma amino butyric acid (GABA) levels and has been shown to have calming properties. This website describes the studies about, and the benefits of, this supplement.

Using probiotics daily can also help dogs relax and calm. It takes some research to find products with several strains of active ingredients and a delivery system that can survive the stomach acids. Your veterinarian can probably recommend products that he or she is familiar with.

Finally, there are many homeopathy, herbs, and flower-essence products that people swear by. Talking with someone who is knowledgeable about herbal supplements and homeopathy is essential before changing your dog's diet, as supplements in this category can have side effects that must be fully understood.

Management is simply preventing your dog from practicing unwanted behaviors as much as humanly possible.

Management

Management is simply preventing your dog from practicing unwanted behaviors as much as humanly possible. Each time your dog has the opportunity to behave (positively or negatively), he is not only getting better at that behavior, but he is being reinforced for it.

Management is about prevention, so if your dog surfs the counters, restrict access to the counter when you are unable to supervise, and keep things picked up so your dog can't self-reinforce by stealing things from the counters. Good management tools can include baby gates, crates, exercise pens, closing doors, keeping the garbage can closed, picking up laundry, and more. Managing your dog is not teaching your dog to relax, of course, but merely preventing him from getting better at the unwanted behavior.

Time

Successful training plans require a commitment from you and can be approached in several ways. You can commit a concentrated effort to working with your dog, or you can drag out the training plan for much longer than is needed.

Dragging out the plan has flaws that point directly to failure for many households with dogs in need of calming. It's like potty training children. When you drag it out, that translates to more dirty diapers to take care of over that period of time. Instead, you could be done in just a few weeks and use the extra time for more pleasant activities.

Everyone has a different lifestyle and routine, of course. Finding 5-10 minutes for training once or twice a day will get you there eventually, but if you can block off 15-20 minutes two or three times a day, you will be on your way to a more relaxed dog in a much shorter time period.

Training



Teaching your dog how to self-calm and how to focus on you are two of the fastest ways to help your dog learn how to settle down. Automatic eye contact is a very rewarding behavior to teach your dog, and it can become a way for your dog to "ask permission" when he wants something. When dogs have direction and skills that help them get what they want, they are much calmer overall.

To teach your dog automatic eye contact, set aside some training time. Each time your dog looks at your eyes, mark that behavior with a word or a clicker. Mark the second your dog looks at your eyes, even if it's just a flicker to begin with, and then give your dog a high-value food reward.

Turn away from your dog and wait for him to move to your front (most dogs do this pretty quickly when there are good treats involved). Wait for your dog to look up at you again; mark and reward again. Do this 15-30 times, and then say, "All done," and put the treats away.

Come back later and repeat the exercise until you can see that your dog is really starting to make solid eye contact, hoping you will mark him again and give him his reinforcement. Once your dog has the hang of this, wait just a little longer before you mark so that you begin to build a little duration with the eye contact. Build duration in tiny increases, such as one second, then two. Bounce around and make it easier sometimes, rather than always making it harder for your dog.

Once your dog is good at making eye contact, practice in different places around the home so that your dog learns that making eye contact is something that can be done anywhere to get what he wants.



When your dog is checking in reliably, start to use eye contact for life rewards. If it's time for a Kong, wait for eye contact first. Mark the eye contact and then put down the Kong. If your dog wants to go outside, try the same thing—the door opens when you get eye contact. If your dog wants to play with a toy, wait for eye contact before engaging in play, and so on.

If your dog is really exuberant when you begin this exercise and jumps on you to get the treat, use lower-value rewards such as regular dry dog food, and/or stop training for a few minutes until he is calmer. If you keep up this training for a few weeks, your dog will have a nice skill that he can choose to use. Your dog will also be more calm and relaxed overall.

Note that food rewards should be tiny, about the size of a pea, and very easy to swallow, rather than something the dog has to chew a lot. Pieces of hot dogs, cheese, and chicken are at the top of the list for most dogs. Be sure to adjust your dog's daily food allotment to account for these treats to prevent extra weight gain.

Another trained other behavior that can lower your dog's arousal levels is Relax on a Mat (instructions included in link). The exercise allows the dog to set criteria for each step toward the goal behavior of relaxing his body. This control helps dogs make good choices, in contrast to just being told what to do all the time. Dogs that learn they have choices are calmer, more relaxed dogs overall—just like when people have choices. When they are not sure what to do, this simple exercise helps dogs choose calmness and then, eventually, default to a relaxed down position rather than spiraling up.

Ahh—relax and take a bow!

Providing your dog with skills that promote relaxation, putting in the training time, and offering your dog a balance of mental and physical exercise results in not only a more relaxed, calmer dog, but in a solid relationship with your dog. A healthier and stronger relationship with your dog is just one of many extra benefits of helping your dog discover the "calm zone."