

Managing a lead-reactive dog

If you have a dog lunging, pulling toward, or barking at other dogs on walks, you will know how stressful and embarrassing it can be. You may be offered “advice” from well-meaning friends and relatives (who are not dog professionals) that only seem to make the matter worse. We have a few tips that may help your dog display the behaviour you wish to see.

Lead-reactive behaviour has many components that must be considered.

1. When off-lead and in their own environment, dogs naturally greet from the side (in an “arc”) and sniff each other’s genital area. They don’t approach head-on and make hard eye contact unless a fight is about to start. They also don’t typically greet for more than a few seconds.
2. When our dogs meet on lead, they are typically forced to approach head-on (if on a path, for example) and unable to turn their bodies. Their forced body language — and our own — indicate to the dogs that we want to fight with the other pair. Most dogs *don’t* want to fight, so they display a number of behaviours designed to prevent this: barking, lunging, growling, anything to make the threat go away. We call these “distance-increasing behaviours.”
3. If the two people do decide to visit, or let the dogs “say hi,” the problems may increase. Both dogs are on lead, trapped, and unable to increase distance from each other. Often, the owners have their dogs on tight leads, “in case anything happens.” Unfortunately, the tight leads communicate tension to the dogs, further increasing their stress. What often happens is an explosion of barking as both dogs go from flight (which is impossible) to fight. If this doesn’t occur, both owners might assume the dogs are “fine” because neither is barking or growling: they may not recognize signs of stress like pacing, panting, scratching, flattened ears and low tails.
4. In addition, many owners do not recognize rude behaviour in their “friendly” dogs. They allow their dog to charge up to another dog, get in his face, bump him and jump on him. This is *extremely* rude behaviour among dogs, and is

sometimes the result of insufficient dog-dog socialization past the young puppy stage. Adult dogs, while patient with puppy antics, will discipline the pup once he reaches 5-6 months: he is now sexually mature and must learn how to behave. The discipline is non-violent and usually takes the form of barks and growls. If a puppy never experiences these corrections, he may carry his inappropriate greetings right into adulthood. When an adult dog inappropriately greets another dog, the other dog will react (“What are you doing? Get off me!”) and the owner of the first is likely criticize the other for her dog’s “aggression,” unaware her own dog was the aggressor.

5. Many people “correct” their dog for any perceived display of aggression. Some, in addition, force their dog to sit or lie down in the approaching dog’s path (while correcting) to “put him in his place.” **Doing so can be very dangerous for several reasons.** First, Fido is learning other dogs (and potentially other people) make bad things occur: Fido starts out feeling stressed, cannot escape because of the lead, and is then punished by his owner. Remember **any punishment (yelling, jerking the lead, grabbing the dog, saying “no,” etc.) increases Fido’s anxiety level: he perceives his owner’s tension, but not the reason for it.** Most likely, he will try even harder to keep other dogs away to avoid such trauma. Second, “correcting” a dog for growling or barking at another may punish the warning out of him: he may go from seeing the dog to biting with no warning (barking, growling, etc.) in between. Third, correcting a dog who is highly aroused may cause him to redirect his aggression onto the handler.

So, what to do? Here are some steps to improve the quality of yours and Fido’s walks:

1. Work on getting his attention before you go out: simply say his name and reward him for looking at you. Start in a low-distraction environment (like your living room), then the garden and gradually move to busier areas, only continuing when you can get Fido’s attention no matter what. You are teaching him to look at you comfortably regardless of the environment.

2. **PLAN AND PREPARE!** You will soon be accustomed to planning your walks. Aim for areas with enough space to work in – this means no narrow paths. A field is great for creating any distance necessary. Have some escape routes up your sleeve. Go armed with a selection of tasty treats on you, or even a toy if Fido is toy orientated. It really doesn't matter if you go to the same place – there will always be new sniffs and interesting things for your dog. Your main concern is providing a space where your dog can feel safe, comfortable and relaxed.
3. Learn about dog body language and communication – observe both your environment and your dog for any potential triggers and changes in your dog's demeanour – these can be very subtle, from a yawn, a lip lick, a turn away, a lift of one paw, air scenting, displacement sniffing, to the less subtle freeze, shake off.

It wouldn't do any harm to learn the language Fido is speaking. Have a look at this link:

<http://en.turid-rugaas.no/calming-signals---the-art-of-survival.html>

4. Start at a distance from any dogs: wait until Fido notices them, and immediately get his attention and reward. Do not wait for him to react! You are teaching him to associate the presence of other dogs with something wonderful. When he looks up at you for more, go closer and repeat. Tell him what a good boy he is for looking at the other dog. This also breaks his eye contact before it quickly develops into a stare. **DISTANCE IS CRUCIAL IN HELPING LEAD REACTIVE DOGS. AS IS KEEPING THEIR AROUSAL/STRESS LEVELS AT A MINIMUM. TO BEGIN WITH, WE SUGGEST WALKING THEM IN VERY QUIET PLACES SO THEY LEARN TO RELAX ON WALKS, LET THEM SNIFF AND EXPLORE AND ONCE MORE RELAXED, YOU CAN TRY SOME FOCUS AND DISTRACTION TECHNIQUES.**
5. If he barks and lunges at the dogs, your training went too far too fast. Or you just didn't realize a dog was nearby. Simply add more distance and repeat. **DO NOT PUNISH FIDO FOR BARKING**, or you will undo all of your work thus far!
6. Manage Fido's environment for his and everyone's safety. Keep him at a comfortable distance from other dogs, don't

allow others to greet (at this time), and certainly don't allow others to invade Fido's space. Every negative experience will set your dog's progress back, so don't let it happen! **If you live in a very dog busy area consider taking the dog where less dogs are present.**

7. If you find yourself approaching another dog head-on, simply go around him in an "arc," keeping your dog's attention as usual. If the other dog starts to lunge and bark, keep Fido's attention and reward more often. *As soon as the other dog goes away, so do the treats.* This will further his association of other dogs with wonderful things.
8. If your dog has harmed another person or dog, we recommend acclimatising him to a muzzle** for walks. This will keep everyone safe while you are working on the behaviour.
9. We also recommend seeking professional assistance. Please see section on Behaviourists.

** <http://www.muzzlesforgreyhounds.com/kenel-kosy.html>

Please remember that your dog is reacting because he is scared/wary of other dogs - it is unfair and simply cruel to keep making him confront this fear. Doing so will merely compound his fear. Give him time and patience to learn and gain confidence.

Understand the physiological changes that happen when your dog is stressed. We all as humans experience stress and some of us will know what it feels to be at the end of your tether, where the slightest thing can set you off. Usually we would have undergone a series of events that have built up and hey presto, we are now extremely irritable, on edge and about to explode! Learn about 'trigger stacking.'

Unfortunately, stress is prevalent in today's society and it is no different for dogs. A lot of our hounds will have experienced a huge amount of stress and sadly trauma too. Periods of prolonged stress can wreak havoc to the dog's physical and mental health and they need time to recover and heal from this. I guess you could equate it to a "nervous breakdown." Stress levels do not go away over-night. If your dog is stressed, then promote calmness and relieve them from any pressure, don't place unrealistic expectations or ideals on them. **Do not try and fit your dog into the**

lifestyle you may have dreamed about. Make appropriate changes to help your dog.

A useful article in relation to stress/reactivity and what happens to the body:

<https://paws4udogs.wordpress.com/2012/07/06/the-cortisol-vacation/>

Also consider that your dog may never have been on a collar/harness/lead before, so to be on a lead, for their own safety, is a very odd feeling to them and can easily cause frustration. Again, give them time to learn.

REMEMBER:

Walking is a small percentage of their lives. It is not the end of the world owning a lead-reactive hound, it may mean making some changes to support your hound, but they will appreciate your efforts. They are supposed to be your friend after all. Dogs have a relatively short time with us. We can spend too long trying to “fix” them, rather than just loving them for who they are.