
THE REACTIVE DOG



SURVIVAL GUIDE

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WELCOME TO THE FRAY

“Yeah, my dog is reactive.” A statement worn like a badge of honor.

Ask the battle-scarred owner of a reactive dog to talk about their experiences, and watch the slightly crazed look cross their face as they recall their war stories. Stories of public embarrassment, getting kicked out of obedience class, and that one time when their shoulder was *this close* to being dislocated when Fido lunged after the chihuahua across the street.

Okay, maybe I'm being dramatic. But seriously, dealing with an out-of-control dog can be pretty frustrating and overwhelming. It sucks to be “that person” with the psychotic beast at the park, when everyone else's dogs are perfectly behaved. Or maybe you have to keep your dog locked up in a separate room when guests come over, lest they be subjected to a growling, barking tornado of furry fury.

I get it. I've been there (and I'm still there with one of my dogs. When it comes to his reactivity issues, my border collie mix is *almost* cured, but still needs some work). This is not what you signed up for when you got a dog. You wanted a friendly companion you could show off to friends and take on trips to the dog park, right?

The good news is that this *can* be fixed. It'll take patience, understanding, and an ample supply of chopped-up hotdogs, but it can be fixed.

The Reactive Dog Survival Guide is divided into three sections. First, we'll discuss some frequently asked questions about reactivity. Part two, Strategy, will lay out the plan of action. Part three, Tactics, provides training exercises with step-by-step instructions.

FAQ

So what exactly is a reactive dog?

A reactive dog is one who flips out, loses control, and generally makes a fool of herself when exposed to certain stimuli. We refer to these stimuli as **“triggers.”** Your dog's triggers may vary. Common triggers include: other dogs, adult men, hyperactive children, and sudden loud noises. Symptoms may include barking, lunging, spinning, snarling, growling, crying, etc.

It's not pretty.

Any breed can be reactive, but it's especially common in the herding types, like border collies and cattle dogs. These dogs were bred for laser focus and the ability to instantly react to changes in their environment. This is great for herding sheep, dodging cow hooves and competing in dog sports, but this intensity can also translate into severe overreaction to everyday occurrences, like meeting the neighbor's Great Dane on a walk.

Each reactive dog has a **threshold**, or a point at which her trigger will make her lose her mind. Sub-threshold, she might get nervous and antsy, but she is still in control of her actions and she can still take instruction from her handler. But when she reaches her threshold, she literally can't control herself. She's so focused on the trigger that everything else gets tuned out. You can yell, yank the leash, or wave food in her face and she'll act like you're not even there. Once a dog is past this point of no return, attempting to train/correct/console is pointless. You gotta get her away from the trigger so you can calm her down and let her get her brain back.

What causes reactivity? Is it dominance? Fear? What exactly does my dog hope to accomplish by flipping out like this?

True reactivity is fear-based. All the lunging, snarling, and barking may give the image of a confident, obnoxious dog, but the opposite is true. This is a very insecure dog. She's afraid of the trigger, and her reaction is intended to scare it away.

Notice that I said “true” reactivity, because there is another group of dogs that is often lumped into the reactive category. These dogs aren't *afraid* of their trigger – they want to *play* with their trigger. Their crazy response is just because they are frustrated at not being allowed to interact with the trigger. This is called **boundary frustration**, but we shall simply refer to these dogs as **spazzes**.

A fear-reactive dog reacts to the presence of another dog by going, “oh no, a BIG SCARY DOG! This is bad! I've got to scare him away!” while a spaz goes, “oh wow, a DOG! I wanna play! Why won't you let me play?! Let me go let me go letmego!”

These dogs are basically suffering from a lack of impulse control.

We're mostly talking about fear-reactive dogs in this guide, but the treatment for spazzes is pretty much the same, so you spaz owners are welcome to follow along.

Off-leash, my dog is fine with other dogs. But if she's leashed, she freaks. What gives?

Ah, but this is the most common form of reactivity. It even has its own name: **leash-reactivity**. Clever, huh?

If your dog is spazzy, being on leash makes her boundary frustration flare up. She may bark and lunge, carrying on as if she wants to kill someone as she drags you to her destination. But as soon as she reaches it, she's fine.

If your dog is fear-reactive: When an off-leash dog is afraid of something, she has the option of fight-or-flight. When she's on leash, flight is no longer an option. She suddenly feels like she has no control over what happens, which

causes her anxiety level to skyrocket. Are you afraid of spiders? Imagine that someone nearby is holding a ginormous spider. You might be nervous and/or grossed out, but you stay cool. Then someone twice your size grabs your arm and forces you to stand right next to the guy with the spider. How nervous are you now?

Also, **tension travels both ways through the leash.** If you are tense, anticipating your dog's crazy behavior, your body language will show it. You'll probably hold the leash taut, which will make your dog's reaction worse. Focus on staying calm and relaxed, and keep the leash as slack as possible.

Leash-reactivity is so common, in fact, that the exercises in this guide will focus on leash-reactive dogs. I did this in an attempt at simplicity. But if even if you have a dog who is reactive to, say, visitors at your front door, or children playing, the same strategies and tactics/exercises apply.

STRATEGY

We're going to come at this with a couple of techniques called **desensitization** and **counter-conditioning**. But first, you need to know more about a word that will become very important to you: **thresholds**.

How to work with your dog's thresholds

As we've established, a threshold is the point of no return; when Fido passes his threshold, his brain is shut off to everything except whatever triggered him. You can't desensitize, condition, or otherwise work with him in this state. So we're going to **focus on working sub-threshold**. Figure out the point at which the trigger can be present in the environment at a low enough intensity that it doesn't set off your dog's fear. This may mean that you need to be half a block (or more!) away from the trigger. You want your dog fully aware of the trigger, but still able to take instruction from you. You're going to work at this sub-threshold point 100% of the time in the training process.

The goal of the training/conditioning is to slowly increase Fido's threshold. Let's say Fido's trigger is the chocolate lab who lives behind a chain-

link fence down the street. The lab doesn't get out much, and entertains himself by barking and lunging ferociously at all who dare pass. He's quite intimidating and Fido gets really worked up whenever he sees the lab. Right now, Fido's sub-threshold point is at half a block away. Eventually, you'll increase that threshold enough so that you'll be able to calmly walk Fido ten feet in front of the lab.

How to identify your dog's thresholds

Especially early on in training, it's important that your dog never reaches his thresholds.

We want to completely eliminate the out-of-control behavior. Every time Fido engages in this behavior, it reinforces this bad habit and makes it harder to break.

How do you know when you're in the danger zone? Obviously, if Fido starts going bonkers, he's at threshold. But there are other more subtle signals that he'll give when he's *about* to go bonkers.

Behaviors to watch out for:

A fixated stare – Ears forward, body pointed straight at the trigger.

Raised hackles – this is involuntary, like goosebumps. It's a great indicator of your dog's internal state.

Growling – pretty self explanatory.

Increasingly frantic movements – Fido may dart back and forth, “tap dance” with his front paws, or bounce up and down.

Ignoring your attempts to communicate – call his name, ruffle his fur, or nudge him with your foot. A dog whose mind is present in his body will almost always acknowledge you in some way, whether by glancing back at you or flicking an ear in your direction. If he totally blows you off, it's probably because he's zeroed in on the trigger.

These are all signs that your dog is losing control. If your dog starts sending you these signals, then you're too close to threshold. Immediately back off to a safe point, and continue from there.

The food test:

For training/desensitizing, you're going to need some really good treats.

Something Fido really likes, like bits of cheese, chicken or hotdog. You'll be feeding Fido treats frequently in the beginning of training. Even dogs who are very distracted should be willing to accept treats from you. But a dog who is very *stressed* will not eat. If you're getting close to the trigger and Fido starts ignoring your offered treats, you're too close to threshold.

Calming signals:

Calming signals are subtle behaviors dogs offer when they are in potentially uncomfortable situations. It's their attempt to calm themselves and others. Calming signals are very helpful when training reactive dogs (actually, they're *a/ways* helpful) because they tell us that the dog still has enough presence of mind to use them. The dog is aware of the potentially overwhelming situation and is trying to diffuse it. If your dog is offering calming signals, it's an indicator that while the situation is getting a bit scarier, it's still sub-threshold, and you can proceed (with caution).

Calming signals include:

- Yawning
- Lip licking
- Blinking repeatedly and/or slowly
- Scratching
- Sniffing
- Dipping the head
- Sitting or lying down
- Stretching
- Sneezing
- Lifting a paw like a bird dog on point
- Shaking off, like he's trying to dry himself
- Deliberately turning away – anything from a glance away to a full body turn

These are all basic guidelines, not hard-and-fast rules. Make it your business to identify your dog's unique set of signals. Maybe in your dog, certain calming signals indicate he's too close to threshold. Maybe one of the danger signs I listed is just a normal quirk for your dog. Maybe he has some warning signals that I didn't even mention. Bottom line: know your dog, and make your best judgment calls.

Desensitization & Counter-Conditioning

Right now, the presence of Fido's triggers causes an intense fearful, emotional reaction.

Our goal is to increase his thresholds by **a)** lowering the intensity of his reaction to the point where he isn't reacting negatively at all, and **b)** actually change his emotional response, so that he learns that the presence of the trigger means good things happen to him.

Systematic desensitization is the process of gradual exposure to a trigger at a low intensity, sub-threshold point. As Fido learns, “hey, this isn't so bad,” you increase the intensity slightly and repeat the process. You do this again and again until Fido is comfortable with the trigger at full intensity.

Counter-conditioning is a process that teaches your dog to have a positive response to something that was once negative. This means teaching a positive *emotional* response: “whenever I see that dog across the street, I get liver treats! I LOVE the dog across the street.” It also means teaching a positive incompatible behavior: Your dog cannot be lunging at the dog across the street and walking nicely at your side eating liver treats at the same time.

Keys for success with desensitization and counter-conditioning

Slow and steady wins the race – desensitization will not work if you move too fast. You must proceed at a pace that is comfortable for your dog and never let him get overwhelmed. It may be tempting to rush ahead when it seems like Fido is making progress, but don't! Patience, grasshopper. **Let's go back to the example of the ferocious chocolate lab who lives down the street.** You find your starting sub-threshold point of half a block away. You work with your dog for a few minutes, practicing calm leash walking and feeding him treats. All is well, and Fido even seems relaxed. What's the next step? Go 10-20 feet closer to the chocolate lab's yard, while repeating calm leash walking and feeding of treats. It may be tempting to try walking right past the lab's yard, but don't. If your dog reaches his threshold, you'll be right back at square one.

The trigger must predict the feeding of treats, not the other way around – for counter-conditioning to work, Fido has to learn that the ferocious chocolate lab = treats. **Trigger must appear before you present food.** The order is important. Whatever comes *last* in the sequence of trigger-and-reward is what

your dog will base his emotional response on. You want Fido to learn that the presence of the chocolate lab will predict treats. You *don't* want Fido to learn that the presence of treats predicts the presence of the chocolate lab.

It's like little kids and doctor's appointments. Imagine you're seven years old, and you hate going to the doctor's. But if your mom takes you out for ice cream after every appointment, you might start to look forward to doctor visits! However, if mom takes you out for ice cream BEFORE your appointment, you're still dreading the appointment. You might start hating ice cream, since it means you have to go the doctor's later.

You need really good treats – experiment and figure out what foods Fido loves the most. Cheese, hotdogs, chicken or ground beef are all popular choices. The treats should be soft and cut into small pieces (about pea size). These should be really special treats that Fido only gets when you do this training. Save the mediocre Snausages for doing tricks in your living room. It's also okay to **use a toy instead of treats**, if Fido has a toy he really loves. If you have a frisbee-obsessed border collie, for example, you can play tug with the frisbee or do some short tosses as a treat alternative.

Establish some incompatible behaviors – figure out what behaviors you would like Fido to do in place of the old behavior of flipping out. If your dog is reactive to visitors at the front door, a good incompatible behavior is a sit-stay. He can't be lunging and sitting at the same time. Since we're going to focus on leash-reactive dogs, the incompatible behavior we want is for the dog to **walk nicely at your side**. Start by practicing these behaviors at home, away from scary distractions.

You'll also need a command called “this way,” which is designed to help you get Fido's attention and quickly retreat if it looks like things are about to go bad. You may run into a stray dog, or an overzealous stranger may rush up and try to pet your dog without your permission. You'll learn “this way” in the tactics section. **What if Fido does flip out?** The most important thing is that *you* don't flip out. Maintain calm body language, and get the hell out of there. If that means you have to calmly drag Fido behind you while people are staring, so be it. Get to a “safe point,” chill out, and start over.

I was once on a training walk with a client and her adolescent dog who was beginning to show signs of fear-reactivity toward men. I had the dog on leash, and all was going fine until the pup growled at my client's neighbor, who had come out to say hi. The neighbor, 6'4 and built like a linebacker, decides to help

me out by lunging toward the dog and telling her to f*** off. The dog freaks, and all progress we've made that day is gone. You can imagine what I then felt like telling this guy, but I assure you, I was much more professional than *that*. Point is, **you never know what's gonna happen when training in public**. Don't be afraid to step in to protect your dog and tell obnoxious people to f*** off (politely or otherwise) when necessary.

TACTICS

Exercise One: Walking at Your Side

Step one: Start in your home or backyard – Get a container of your really good treats. Put Fido on leash, and go somewhere in your home with no serious distractions. Start with your dog facing you.

Call Fido toward you, and walk backwards. As Fido walks with you, praise him and give him treats. One treat per every two steps (your steps, not his). The rate at which you feed treats is called the “**rate of reinforcement**,” or ROR. You will adjust the ROR depending on the difficulty of what you're asking Fido to do. Walking like this is easy, so after a few repetitions of backward walking, you can decrease the ROR to one treat every 10-15 steps.

Step two: Turn so that you and the dog are walking side by side - Praise Fido for walking with his shoulder in line with your leg. Temporarily increase the ROR for a couple repetitions of this, then decrease it again.

Step three: Add the verbal cue – Now when you start walking, add a cue like “let's go!” or “heel,” or whatever you like. Be sure to say it in a happy, upbeat tone – you want Fido to be excited about this stuff.

You should be able to get from step 1 to step 3 in one or two sessions of about ten minutes each, depending on Fido's enthusiasm level. **Always keep sessions short and end them before Fido gets bored.**

Repeat step 3 twice a day over the next few days. Try to practice it in a new location in your home/yard each time.

Step four: Add non-scary distractions – Add stuff that is interesting, but not trigger-worthy. Have your kids play in the same room, go for a short walk, train when someone is cooking food, etc. Every time you increase distractions, temporarily increase the rate of reinforcement. Work on this step for a few days.

If your dog is a serious leash puller, it might help to get a training tool like a **Gentle Leader or a front-clip harness**. These tools don't hurt your dog, but they reduce pulling and give you greater control than a regular collar or harness. Find out more about these tools at 3lostdogs.com.

Step five: Add low level trigger exposure – The moment of truth. Take a deep breath, stay calm. Starting half a block away from the ferocious chocolate lab, where Fido is aware of the situation (remember, trigger must come before reward), tell him “let's go!” **Really increase the ROR now**, to one treat every two steps. Praise him a lot! Keep telling him what a good dog he is. If Fido breaks position and starts walking ahead, turn around and walk the other way. Repeat as necessary. This step might take two days or it might take two weeks. Depends on how often you train and how serious Fido's reactivity is.

Step six: Repeat with ever-increasing trigger intensity – closely monitor your dog's body language for signs of distress. When Fido is comfortable with the current level of intensity, increase it slightly. Remember to adjust the ROR based on how difficult a time Fido is having. When it gets easier, decrease the ROR to one treat every four steps, six steps, eight steps, and so on. When it gets hard, go back to one every two steps. (You'll want to decrease the amount of food Fido gets at meals, to prevent him from gaining extra weight from all this desensitization)

If at any point Fido starts giving off danger signs, immediately go back one or two levels and start again from there.

Exercise Two: This Way

Step one: Start in your home/backyard – First, you want Fido to have a quick reaction to his name. Hearing you say his name should be the best thing in the world! When he's looking away, say “Fido!” As soon as he looks at you, tell him what an amazing puppy he is and give him a treat. You should only need to

work on this step for one day before Fido is snapping his head around to look when you call his name.

Step two: Sharp turns when walking – Walk your dog with your “let's go!” cue. Suddenly say “Fido! This way!” and run backwards. If Fido quickly turns to follow you, praise and treat. If he stand there and looks at you like you're crazy, gently tug the leash and reward him when he gets to you. Make all kinds of unpredictable turns: left, right, backwards, u-turns, etc. Aim for a fast reaction from Fido. The idea is that one day, if you ever see danger approaching, you'll be able to say “Fido, this way!” Your dog will snap to attention and follow you, avoiding a tricky situation.

Step three: Add non-scary distractions – just like you did with the Walking at Your Side exercise.

Step four: Add low level trigger exposure – again, same as with the Walking at Your Side exercise.

Step five: Practice in non-emergency, higher-intensity situations – Don't wait until you need this command to use it. When you are practicing calm walking in the presence of high level, but sub-threshold triggers, throw in a few sharp retreats, turns and u-turns with your “this way” command.

CLOSING WORDS

So, how long until your dog is “cured?” It's really hard to say. It depends on a lot of factors, like how much time you can dedicate to this, your skill level, and how much of a nutcase your dog really is. **If you are diligent, you'll see significant improvement in a matter of a few months.**

“MONTHS?!” You gasp in horror. Yes, my friend, this stuff takes time. Reactivity is a major issue and there are no reliable quick fixes. Depending on the severity of the reactivity, it's quite possible that Fido will never get to a completely normal level. If you have a severely dog-reactive dog, you'll probably always need to provide extra supervision and management when your dog is in the presence of other dogs. Same goes for extra supervision around kids if your dog is currently reactive to children.

My three-year-old border collie has been severely fear-reactive to visitors

coming into our home since I adopted him at seven months of age. Like I said in the intro, my pup has made huge improvements over the past couple years. But will he ever get to the point where I would be totally comfortable when he's around guests, like I am with my other dogs? I doubt it.

This guide should provide you with everything you need to start correcting your dog's crazy behavior. If you need further assistance, I have a training course called “Give Your Dog a Brain: How to Get Your Out-of-Control Dog to Chill Out, Focus, and Do What You Say.” This course looks beyond the issue of reactivity and deals with dogs with out-of-control behavior of all types. It includes an ebook, videos, and other resources. [Check it out here.](#)

If you have any questions that you don't see answered here, you can contact me at 3LostDogs.com.

I wish you luck, patience, and determination on your quest to calm your reactive pooch.

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