



## RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

# Adrenalin Levels

Have you ever felt as though your dog sometimes goes over the top when reacting to certain things? Do you sometimes find it hard to understand why your dog, for 'no apparent reason', will react in a manner totally out of proportion to the stimulus they are faced with?

Call it arousal level, self control, energy state... There's a lot more going on for your dog than just the event they're reacting to. Events earlier in the day, or even in the previous few days, can heighten your dog's arousal levels, and reduce their coping abilities significantly. Humans do this too! The kids won't get out of bed, someone pulls out on you in traffic, your employer gives you an extra task at work, you've forgotten your lunch - at the end of the day, and not being able to find your keys in your bag is suddenly a hugely frustrating exercise! Then your partner asks you for some simple task and you explode! Things 'build up' like this for our dogs as well.

### **'Seeing' your dog's stress**

Your dog will give you signals that they are stressed and/or over aroused. Body language signs include; excessive panting, high respiration rates, high pitched repetitive vocalisation, piloerection (hackles raised), flared whiskers, stiff body posture, penis crowning, high tongue flick rates, nervous behaviour such as pacing, jumping, complete lack of ability to concentrate are some.

However, stress can also be displayed without arousal. For example; dilated pupils, lip licking, tightened facial muscles and head turning. Sometimes dogs will show no arousal and appear almost calm. This can make it hard to recognise that they are actually stressed. For more signs refer to the info sheet canine body language.

### **What can cause it?**

Stressful events from your dog's point of view - dog fights, a visit to the groomers or vets, bath time, corrections in training, being yelled at, being pulled up the stairs or pushed outside, the postman or courier coming past the house, the garbage truck, inappropriate play with another dog, having a valuable resource taken away, having visitors over, people and dogs walking past your house, renovations in or near the home, seeing another dog on a walk, being moved from a sleeping spot... The list goes on. Remember, it is what your dog finds stressful; it may not necessarily be stressful for you.

### **Candle analogy**

Think of every little trigger or stressor in your dogs environment as a burning candle. Some triggers or events may equal 1 candle, but others may equal 3 or 4, or even 9! For a dog scared of other dogs they encounter on walks, the candle count may equal 10.

How many candles does it take....for the pot to boil?



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Now imagine a pot of water is your dog. One candle under a pot of water won't make much difference on its own - however, ten candles underneath may cause the pot to boil over! The number of candles each individual dog can handle before reaching boiling point will vary.

For example, a daily arousal balance sheet might look like:

	Candle	Total
1. You drop a pot on the kitchen floor in front of your dog. Your dog gets a fright and jumps back.	1	1
2. Then, the postman comes. For your dog, this is a very stressful event. Your dog races outside and runs up and down the fence barking uncontrollably and doesn't even hear your call her.	5	6
3. Then you yell at her to be quiet when she comes back to you after barking at the postman	1	7
4. Later in the day you take her for a walk and a dog runs out of a yard and bark and growls at your dog. You yell out and pull your dog away from the loose dog.	6	13
5. Then on the way home you are coming across a person walking a dog across the street, normally this is nothing that would phase your dog in any way but now suddenly your dog rears up, strains on the lead and whines and barks uncontrollably. You can't understand why they're 'overreacting' about this.	1	14

You walk home, completely deflated and disappointed and think your dog can't learn or listen to you, is aggressive to other dogs and will never be able to be calm around other dogs on walks. You now have 20 candles burning too!!

### Adrenalin sticks around

The adrenalin and corticosteroids that are released in stressful events are controlled by the sympathetic nervous system. They can change the thought processes in the brain so the dog is more reactive to stimulation, rather than thinking before responding to a stimulus. It can take up to 6 days (Dwyer 2011) for these levels of hormones to come back down to normal! If a dog is constantly living with this heightened state of arousal, it is very difficult for them to be calm, and think about their responses.





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### How do I help my dog keep adrenalin levels at bay?

Firstly, prevent their exposure to triggers they find stressful as much as possible. This will help their adrenaline levels stay low. As well, we must teach them how to cope with these triggers gradually and positively. So, when these triggers do happen one after another, you know what to do and how to help your dog cope. (Consult our private trainers and refer to 'training dogs to overcome their fears'.)

### Crate training/denning

Teaching your dog to be happy in a crate is a very useful tool. It can help dogs to switch off and aid in reducing stress levels. It is like your dog's own bedroom, where they can go to relax with nothing bothering them. Refer to 'crating for management' for step by step instructions on how to teach your dog to love a crate.

### Couch days

If we sometimes allow our dogs to have a day or two where they don't go out for a walk, don't play games, don't have visitors or play dates, it can help to reduce their adrenalin levels. It is just like us having a day where we veg out on the couch and watch DVDs all day. We don't answer the phone, don't go out at all, and don't even get out of our pyjamas! Just like people, dogs need to get used to this gradually. So, if your dog is used to being taken for a hour long walk everyday, start by only going for 45 minutes, then 30 minutes, then maybe 10 minutes, then just phase it out for a day.

If, for example, your dog reacts to other dogs on walks, exposing them to other dogs every day and letting them practice their usual response (getting really worked up!) every day, does not teach them what you would like them to do. Reducing their exposure and teaching them in controlled situations is more effective.

### Want more info?

To get you started with helping to manage adrenalin levels we recommend that you enlist the help of our private training or home training service.

### References:

Beckman, Daina (2007) Stress and Cortisol: Why Your Dog Can't Learn and Think Clearly, Dog Psychology Help. <http://dogpsychologyhelp.com/stress-why-your-dog-cant-learn-think-clearly/>

Dwyer, Bruce (2011) Dog Stress and even overplaying can be deadly to your dog, Dog walkers Melbourne <http://dogwalkersmelbourne.com.au/articles-dog-walking-pet-sitting/73-dog-stress-dangers-adrenalin-cortisone.html>

McCabe, Sue (2014) My Dog, The Adrenalin Junkie <https://www.dogstardaily.com/blogs/sue-mccabe/my-dog-adrenalin-junkie>



## RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Also refer to our other information sheets:

- Canine body language
- Growling
- Lead reactive dogs
- Training dogs to overcome their fears
- Timid dogs and fear aggression

Please contact the RSPCA animal training and behaviour centre for further help and information.

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