HANDLING REACTIVITY

A GUIDE TO MANAGING AND REDUCING REACTIVITY IN DOGS

Understanding Reactivity

Reactivity in dogs refers to heightened responses to specific triggers, such as other dogs, people, or loud noises. A reactive dog may bark, lunge, or become fixated when exposed to their trigger. While reactivity is common, it can be managed effectively with the right training, consistency, and handler awareness.

Reactivity is often rooted in:

Fear or Anxiety – The dog feels threatened and reacts to create distance.

Frustration – The dog wants to interact but is held back (common in social, high-energy dogs).

Overstimulation – The dog struggles to process a busy environment.

Learned Behaviours – The dog has unintentionally been reinforced for reacting (e.g., barking causes other dogs to move away).

KEY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

1.Manage the Environment

- **Distance is key:** Keep enough space between your dog and their trigger to prevent an extreme reaction.
- **Choose low-traffic areas:** Practise training in quiet places before gradually increasing distractions.
- **Use barriers:** Position yourself near walls, parked cars, or hedges to block your dog's view when needed.
- **Keep your own body language calm and neutral:** Avoid tensing up, pulling the leash tight, or drastically changing your path—this can signal to your dog that something is wrong.
- **Give Regular Breaks:** Exposure to triggers can be mentally taxing. Schedule breaks during sessions where your dog can sniff, play, or engage in a low-arousal activity.

2. Build Neutrality Through Exposure

- **Engage/Disengage Game:** Reward your dog for noticing their trigger but choosing to look away or refocus on you.
- **Gradual Exposure:** Start with mild exposure at a distance where your dog remains calm and build up over time.
- **Calm Walks:** Avoid approaching other dogs or people directly—move in an arc rather than head-on.
- **Lower Expectations in High-Distraction Environments:** Your dog's ability to perform obedience cues may drop significantly in challenging environments. Instead of verbal commands, use food lures to maintain focus and prevent overwhelming them further.
- **Reward While Walking Backwards:** If your dog becomes tense or overfocused on a trigger, step backward slowly while rewarding them for moving with you. This creates positive space and helps them decompress from built-up tension.

3. Reward Calm Behaviour

- **Catch good moments:** Mark and reward when your dog stays calm, looks at you, or sniffs the ground.
- **Reinforce choices:** Reward your dog for self-regulating instead of reacting.
- **Use food or toys:** High-value treats or a tug toy can help shift focus.
- **Encourage Choice-Making:** Allow your dog to assess situations and disengage on their own. Step in only if their stress signals escalate.

4. Advocate for Your Dog

- **Do not allow other dogs or people to approach** if your dog is showing signs of stress or discomfort. Calmly but firmly ask others to give space.
- **If an off-leash dog approaches without consent:**
  - **Remain calm and take control of the situation.**
  - **Position yourself between your dog and the other dog**. Stand tall and confidently block the approaching dog's path.
  - **Use your foot as a gentle blocker** if necessary to create space without escalating the situation.
  - **Do a controlled 180-degree turn to create distance**, then return to your original path to prevent reinforcing avoidance behaviour.
  - **Stay neutral and avoid over-comforting your dog.** Carry on as if nothing happened to prevent reinforcing fear.

5. Teach Alternative Behaviours

- **Focus on You:** Teach a "watch me" cue to redirect their attention. If they struggle to hold focus, use "touch"instead for a more engaging, interactive redirection.
- **Emergency U-Turns:** Practise turning away smoothly when a trigger appears unexpectedly.
- **Find It Game:** Toss treats on the ground to engage their nose and lower their arousal.

FINAL TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- **Be proactive, not reactive:** Notice triggers before your dog does.
- **Stay calm & confident:** Your dog takes cues from you.
- **Celebrate small wins:** Progress can be slow but consistent reinforcement leads to success.
- **Schedule rest days:** Between training sessions in order to prevent stress build-up and encourage recovery. On these days:

1. Walk in quiet locations with minimal triggers.
2. Avoid exposure to known stressors.
3. Focus on calm enrichment like sniffing games or scatter feeding.
4. Encourage adequate and deep sleep, 16+ hrs.