



Conditioning Relaxation in Dogs: Part I

Read each section of this handout carefully before you begin the training!

Introduction

Dogs that are excitable or that have anxiety/fear issues benefit from training that helps them learn to control their emotional state and relax. It is common for humans to try to soothe or calm the dog when it's anxious by paying attention to the dog – petting, talking, etc. Consoling the dog when it is anxious rarely actually teaches the dog to relax and it may reinforce some aspects of the excitable, anxious or aggressive behavior.

A more productive solution is to first TRAIN (or condition) the dog to physiologically and psychologically relax in distraction-free environments away from the trigger situations. Once the dog knows how to relax, we then can use this training to help the dog learn to also relax around problematic stimuli or situations.

We can change the dog's emotional and physiologic state to varying degrees by altering the dog's outward, observable behavior. By reinforcing the physical behaviors that are connected with relaxation and "happiness", we can condition the associated physiological states that correlate with these emotions. (Similarly, if you mistakenly reinforce voluntary behaviors associated with fear, tension, aggression or avoidance, your dog will continue to show these reactions.)

Materials Needed:

- A training (safety) mat on which we condition the relaxation. This is any type of portable dog bed or mat (e.g. memory foam bathmat, yoga mat, blanket, dog bed, etc.). **You will bring this mat out ONLY during the training sessions.** Do not leave the mat out all day.
- Many small pieces of some of your dog's favorite food treats. (See the handout on Maximizing Reinforcement for more information on choosing treats.)
- A quiet, low distraction area to begin the training.

For simplicity, we will refer to a female dog in this handout.

This exercise proceeds in the following sequential steps:

1. Teaching "down"
2. Teaching the dog to be drawn to the mat (making the mat "magic")
3. Teaching the hip roll (or other relaxed position)
4. Arousal control and building duration on the mat in the hip roll
5. Conditioning further relaxation

The Reinforcement Process

Learning to reinforce the dog properly helps your dog focus on

the exercise. Dogs that are very food motivated often remain very aroused around the treats. This is normal and something we must work through during the training. The dog must learn to relax even in the presence of the food. If the dog cannot relax in the presence of food, then your dog will not learn to relax during active training around problematic stimuli (e.g. visitors to the house or seeing dogs outside) where food is necessary or desirable to reinforce your dog's appropriate behavioral choices.

To prevent your dog from lunging for the food, keep the treats in your hand or a small nearby cup. Keep them away from the dog's face. Remember that your personal space zone is still in place during this training. Being observant of the personal space will help your dog relax around the food, so sit 2-3 feet from the dog during this training. The closer you sit to the dog, the more aroused the dog generally remains and the more likely she will be to try to snatch at the treats in your hand.

Whenever the dog is in the down or hip roll position, you will place the food treat on the mat between the dog's front legs at the level of the carpal (or wrist) joints. **(See Figure 1)** Delivering the food in this manner will help your dog direct her attention downward toward the ground rather than up into the air. It also helps minimize how much the dog tracks hands for food. The dog will learn that the treat is predictably delivered on the mat, under her chin, between her front legs, so she will not have to search for the treat. Do NOT toss the treat as the bounce of the treat will elevate the dog's arousal and prevent effective training during Step 4.

If your dog is familiar with clicker training, you can use the clicker during Steps 1-3 but drop the clicker out for Steps 4 and 5. Dogs conditioned to the clicker often become excited or aroused when they hear the click. Instead, mark a successful trial with a calm verbal marker such as "Good."



FIGURE 1

Step 1: Teaching "Down"

If your dog does NOT know how to lie down, you will first need to teach this. Watch this video on how to teach your dog to lie down: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpAFj-p23ig> Teach your dog to lie down wherever your dog is most comfortable and likely to succeed. It is often helpful to start after the dog has gone for a walk and she is less energetic. If you are having difficulty, contact Texas Veterinary Behavior Services (TVBS) or a local trainer for further assistance.



Step 1 Status Check:

Your dog will immediately respond to a cue or follow a hand lure into the down position a minimum of 9 out of 10 trials over 3 separate training sessions. If your dog can do this, move on to Step 2.

Train a release word such as “all done” or “free”. When you cue a behavior, your dog should continue doing that behavior (e.g. sit) until told otherwise with the release word. The release word tells the dog that the given behavior has ended, and she is allowed to move out of that position and take a break.

Step 2: Making the mat “magic” and “magnetic”

This is a 2-part process: training the dog to want to get on the mat and then training the dog to automatically lie down on the mat.

The goal of this step is to train the dog to want to be on the mat at all times when you bring it out. We want the dog so emotionally attached to the mat that the dog does not get off. The general idea is to praise, click, and treat the dog whenever she is standing, sitting or lying on the mat and to stop treating and praising her when she is not on the mat.

Place the mat on the ground and stand near it. If the dog sniffs the mat or steps on it with even one foot, click and drop a treat onto the center of the mat. If the dog remains standing on the mat, click and drop a treat on the mat another 1-3 times. Continue clicking/treating as you take a few slow steps away from the mat. If the dog stays on the mat as you step away, continue clicking and dropping treats on the mat. If your dog follows you, stop treating and praising. Remain quiet and ignore the dog. After a few seconds, slowly walk back near the mat. As soon as the dog steps on the mat again, resume praising, clicking and dropping treats on the mat.

Over training sessions, gradually drift further away from the mat. If the dog stays on the mat, then continue to click and toss treats onto the mat as long as the dog remains standing, sitting, or lying on the mat. Stop treating if the dog leaves the mat.

At this stage of the training, we do not expect any relaxation. In fact, most dogs are very alert and excited because this is a fun and easy game. This is fine at this stage, although we do not want the dog to behave in an unruly manner (e.g. vocalizing, pawing at you or jumping on you) during the training.

When the dog is consistently remaining on the mat even when you drift several feet away, begin cuing the dog to lie down on the mat as soon as the dog steps on it at the start of the training session. Click and treat the dog as before as long as the dog is lying down. If she gets up, stop treating, cue her back down, and resume clicking and treating as you slowly walk around.



Step 2 Status Check:

Your dog gets on the mat immediately and lies down when you set the mat on the ground. The dog consistently stays on the mat when you walk up to 6-10 feet away. If your dog does this consistently for 4 training sessions in a row, move on to Step 3.

Step 3: Teaching the Hip Roll

Tense, alert, and anxious dogs generally lie down in a sphinx position (Figure 2) or a partial hip roll (Figure 3). These positions allow the dog to get up quickly to react to the environment.

To aid the dog in moving toward relaxation, we first train the dog to lie in a full hip roll (Figure 4).



FIGURE 2: Sphinx position



FIGURE 3: Partial hip roll



FIGURE 4: Full hip roll

While in the hip roll position, the dog’s pelvis is parallel to the ground rather than vertical as seen with the sphinx position. Additionally, both of the dog’s hind legs will be extended away from her body. The dog must relax to some degree to be able to hold this position for even a short period of time; therefore, teaching the hip roll is the first small step toward achieving relaxation.

Be sure to train the dog to roll onto both the left and right hip. Most dogs show some degree of preference for rolling onto a certain hip, but it is important to initially practice both sides.

You will be luring the dog’s nose in a semicircle around toward her ribcage behind her elbow (Figures 5-7). You are using the movement of the dog’s head to get the dog’s spine and pelvis to shift. You will mark (click) and treat the shift in the pelvis NOT the movement of the dog’s head.

When you lure the dog clockwise, hold the treat in your left hand and when you lure counterclockwise, hold the treat in your right hand. This prevents you from reaching over your dog’s head and body as you lure her, which some dogs find distracting or intimidating.

Hold a treat right up to your dog’s nose. Let the dog nibble on the treat but do not let go of the treat. Lure the dog’s head around in small increments almost like the numbers on a clock. Keep the treat and your hand close to the ground so the dog’s nose eventually ends up behind the elbow. Click and treat every tiny shift in the dog’s pelvis. As soon as you treat the dog, lure the dog again to try to get the dog to shift further and further until the dog’s pelvis is completely parallel to the ground (Figure 4).

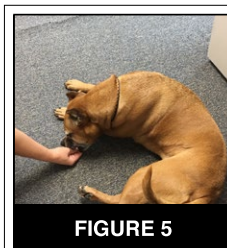


FIGURE 5

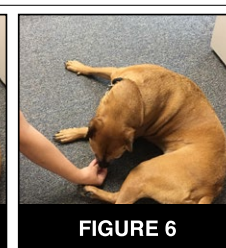


FIGURE 6

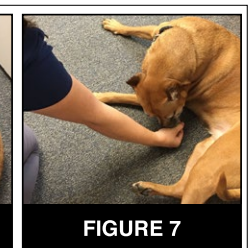


FIGURE 7

Luring the Hip Roll

Most dogs need to learn this in small stages, so do not expect your dog to follow the treat and roll fully onto her hip on the first try.

Watch this video on how to train your dog to roll over onto her hip: <http://youtu.be/zNyeW2jz5KE>

Notice in the above video, initially the dog flips back into the sphinx position immediately after eating the treat. This is not unusual when first learning this behavior. Keep practicing the hip roll and you will notice that the dog starts to briefly pause in the position after being treated.

You now want to train your dog to remain in the hip roll position for 5 seconds. If your dog reverts back to the sphinx position, immediately lure her back into the hip roll and reinforce her. Each time your dog flips back into the sphinx position, immediately lure her back into the hip roll. If your dog stays in the hip roll position for ½-1 second, reinforce her with a treat between her front legs. **(Figure 1)** Reinforce the dog once every second as long as she remains in the full hip roll. When the dog will hold the hip roll for 4 - 5 consecutive trials, then increase the time between the treats to 2 full seconds. Then give your release cue and let the dog get up so you can practice the hip roll training again. Over training sessions, gradually increase the time between treats once the dog is in the hip roll until the dog can remain in the hip roll after the lure or cue for 5 seconds before being treated. You should eventually be able to cue the dog into the hip roll, treat her, then wait for 5 seconds before treating her again.

Step 3 Status Check:



Your dog will immediately go into the hip roll position when verbally cued or given a single hand lure. Once rolled onto her hip, your dog will remain in this position for 5 full seconds 9 out of every 10 trials over 2 separate training sessions. If your dog can do this, move on to Step 4.

Step 4: Building duration on the mat in the hip roll and arousal control

This is the most important and complicated step in the relaxation training process. Training your dog to just go lie on a mat is very useful, but this is the step where you actually begin shaping true relaxation.

During this training, do not walk away from the dog! The goal of this step is to teach the dog to stay and remain calm while you are close to the dog and watching it. You cannot shape relaxation if you are not looking carefully at the dog during the exercise.

During Step 4, we gradually train the dog to remain in the hip roll for longer and longer periods of time with fewer and fewer treats. As the exercise becomes “boring” for the dog (i.e. the dog has to wait longer and longer to get a treat), the dog will begin to relax and be more patient if the training is done properly.

You can begin this process with the trainer standing, sitting on the floor, or sitting in a nearby chair. Remember the personal space bubble defined by the PACE protocol.

As soon the dog goes into the hip roll, reinforce with quiet praise and a food treat. Then place a treat onto the mat between the dog’s front legs. As soon as the dog finishes the treat and lifts her head, place another treat onto the mat between her front legs. Repeat this 3 times. On the next trial, after she lifts her head from eating the previous treat, count 1 full second and then reinforce again. Your dog has now done a 1-second down-stay.

Increase your “down-stay” duration by 1-second intervals. So you start with a 1 second stay, then move to 2 seconds, then 3

seconds, and so on. **The dog must do 3-5 successful trials in a row before you increase the stay duration by another second.** Your end goal is for the dog to remain calmly in the hip roll for a minimum duration of 2 minutes with treats delivered only every 20-30 seconds.

Periodically release your dog so she can have a short break. Give your dog a break after as few as 3 trials or as many as 10 depending on how tense or restless your dog is. Your goal is to release her for a break before she gets so distracted that she gets up and leaves on her own.

This “down stay” is about arousal control – not time or distance, so your dog can fail a stay even if she does not move out of the hip roll or off the mat. Again, this is an arousal stay – can the dog stay at, or below a certain level of arousal for the duration of the stay count?

At the start of the stay count, you will closely watch your dog’s body. Scan the entire body so you see the dog’s ears, eyes, position of its head relative to her neck, tail position (e.g. is the dog wagging or not?), respiratory rate and pattern, lip tension, blinking, etc. Make a subjective assessment of your dog’s baseline arousal/alertness level at the start of your stay count. As the stay count continues, if the dog spikes up above this baseline level of arousal/alertness, even briefly, then the dog has failed the stay. So if you are doing a 6 second stay count, and the dog lays in the hip roll the entire time but whines or paws at you on second 4, then the dog just failed the stay. This is because the dog’s arousal level went UP during the stay. The dog did not STAY CALM. The dog is allowed to have down spikes in arousal (i.e. brief moments of relaxation and then coming back to baseline.) These do not negatively impact the stay and the dog is reinforced at the end of the trial.

What is a failed stay trial? Any trial where the dog fidgets, whines/vocalizes, switches positions or gets up altogether. If the dog fidgets during the trial (or has any up spike in arousal), abort the count, wait until the dog comes back to baseline and then restart the stay count again. For example, if you are doing an 8 second stay and the dog whines or shifts positions on second 6, then you will stop the count (no treat). Once the dog stops fidgeting, start the count back over at 1 second. The dog only gets the treat for successfully staying calm the entire 8 seconds. If your dog actually gets up off the mat or moves out of the hip roll, cue the dog back into the hip roll and verbally **praise but do not treat the dog**. Once the dog is calm, start the stay count again.

As you practice this step, you should notice that your dog’s baseline arousal lowers over time and the dog also starts to show more and more down spikes in arousal and fewer and fewer up spikes. If this is not happening, then review the mechanics of the training session and contact us so we can help you.

As the stay gets longer in duration, your dog may learn that she will get more treats in any time frame if she gets up and down repeatedly versus if she just remains down. Therefore, once your dog can do a 5-second stay, we begin to introduce a “consequence” if she breaks the stay before you release her. At this point if your dog breaks the stay, recue the “down” and hip roll but do not treat her for getting back into position. Instead, just give verbal praise. *During Step 4, the dog only receives a treat for a successful stay.*

Most dogs easily learn to stay calm up to 5 - 7 seconds but have difficulty in the 8 - 15 second range. So careful attention to the mechanics of the exercise is necessary to help the dog through this phase of the training.



Step 4 Status Check:

Your dog will stay on the mat calmly and quietly while in the full hip roll a minimum of 2 full minutes with a treat delivered only every 20-30 seconds over a course of 5 separate training sessions. During this time, your dog should not flip-flop between the sphinx and hip roll positions or paw at you or show other signs of arousal or agitation. If your dog can do this, move on to Step 5.

Step 5: Conditioning Further Relaxation

At this point, we begin selectively reinforcing some of the down spikes (moments of relaxation) that the dog began showing during your stay counts in **Step 4**.

During this phase, you can also incorporate petting, massage, acupressure, TTouch® or other modalities that may help your dog further relax.

Signs of relaxation (down spikes in arousal) that can be reinforced by soft praise and/or a treat include:

- Bouts of frequent slow blinking
- Ears begin to relax down on the sides of the dog's head
- Sighing
- Stretching legs out or tucking a front paw underneath
- Lying over on his/her side
- Corners of lips relaxed and drooping
- Breath rate slow and deep (rather than fast and shallow)
- Placing the head on the ground only as long as it is accompanied by relaxation of the neck and shoulder muscles

An example of a 35-second stay:

0:00 seconds	Sadie lies down on the mat and goes into the hip roll; deliver first treat between front legs
0:01 seconds	When Sadie's head comes up, start stay count (Sadie tucks her front paw underneath) — "Good girl"
0:03 seconds	(Sadie slowly blinks 3 times in succession) — "Good girl" (treat between dog's front legs)
0:015 seconds	(Sadie sighs) — "Good girl" (treat between dog's front legs)
0:20 seconds	Sadie blinks — "Good girl" (treat between front legs)
0:25 seconds	Sadie relaxes her ears — "Good girl" (treat between front legs)
0:35 seconds	"Free" (calmly release Sadie from the mat)

Step 5 Status Check:



Your dog will exhibit at least 5-10 minutes of relaxation over a minimum of 5 separate training sessions. If your dog can do this, move on to the Conditioning Relaxation in Dogs: Part II handout.