

Reactive Dog Worksheet

Reactivity can mean different things:

- **Overexcitement** – dog is overly friendly, and may bark and lunge in frustration
- **Fear with backward energy** – dog wants to escape the situation
- **Forward energy** – dog wants to drive things away (insecure). Some may be in prey drive or actually aggressive (want to go after the thing)

All of these are trainable. It is reasonable to expect just about any dog to be able to maintain behavior expectations in public, in their own bubble. In club, you can practice safely near threshold, raising criteria gradually.

Practice makes better! If you only work on reactivity once in a while, it is hard or impossible to form better habits. Practice regularly for fluency in real life situations.

Foundations

Before you practice around distractions there are a few boxes you need to check at home:

1. **Fulfillment** – most reactivity stems from frustration. Dogs have an intrinsic need to explore, sniff, stalk, run/chase, catch, struggle/fight, consume, and celebrate. These drives can and should be fulfilled through interactive **play and free or long line exploration** every day. You can play with food or with a toy, ball or tug. There are ways to make play even more productive for the reactive dog – but start with getting a game on board (tug and/or fetch).
2. **Clarity** - a lot of frustration comes from when the dog has one expectation and you have another. For the reactive dog, start with being clear that going toward the trigger is off the table. Know how to **advocate for your dog** (keep the trigger away), and how to **redirect and add distance/leave** the situation. Don't allow the dog to practice blowing up.
3. **Obedience** – A third major source of frustration is the leash. Your dog should understand how the leash and your chosen collar, harness or halter works: how to yield to leash pressure. It sounds weird, but many, many dogs don't know this. Practice at home, with treats. Practice loose leash walking, sit, down, stay (at least 10 seconds), leave it and recall. Use a long line as well as your regular leash.
4. **Don't model reactivity**- your dog will react to your energy. Model calm, confidence and focus on the goal.

Readiness Test: you have a game and basic obedience cues on board, take their favorite toy and a bowl of food and an empty bowl. Place these in a triangle about 20 feet per leg. Work your walk and other cues near and past the distractions. Then play a game (you can be on leash) and see if the dog chooses the game over the distraction. If you can do this, you're ready to work greater distractions at club meetings.

The Day of Club Meet-Up

Make sure your dog is feeling good. Do a short play/run session before you come (burn off extra energy and strengthen your connection — don't exhaust them).

Upon arrival: Check in with me, then give your dog time to orient and potty.

Bring: High-value treats, favorite toy(s), water, and cleanup bags.

Three Ways to Work Thresholds (Easiest to hardest):

- **Alternative Behavior** — Replace reactivity with something fun (game play, scentwork, etc.).
- **Incompatible Behavior** — Use focused obedience (heel, stay/place) that makes reacting impossible. Work repetitive patterns while ignoring distractions.
- **Other Behavior** — Let your dog make choices out of command. You manage how challenging it is so they succeed.

Typical Reactivity Session

The main goal is to challenge your dog a little, but not overwhelm.

1. **Warm-up:** Sniff, eliminate, and orient outside the area, no triggers
2. **Goal 1:** Establish initial distance from distraction(s). Stationary distractions are ideal. Work an alternative behavior, ideally some form of play that your dog really loves. Ideas: tug, short fetches, treat toss, hide & seek treats
3. **Break:** Free sniff break at that distance. If dog reacts, ignore and wander a little further distance. When they rejoin, praise, maybe treats.
4. **Goal 2:** Work some obedience commands: loose leash walking, sit stays, down stays, recalls. Work in curves oblique to distractions (curve in a little, then curve away). Praise attention and effort.
5. **Break:** Do a little play, then release to sniff.
6. **Goal 3:** Spend some time out of command ignoring your dog. The goal here is "Chill". You can stand or sit. You can pet your dog occasionally, but no treats. If your dog has trouble calming, you can stand on the leash or tuck it under you with only a little bit of slack while you sit.

7. **Cool Down:** Release & wander (away from triggers), then back to car

Tips for Success:

Stationary distractions are easier than moving ones — start there.

Never allow barking or blowing up. Reward what you want to see.

Use food thoughtfully — avoid feeding high arousal.

Push thresholds carefully, but always end on a good note.

Use calm praise, a little food reward, add distance if needed, then do a relaxed sniff walk back to your rig.

Feel free to talk through your plan or ask questions anytime. I'm here to help you and your dog succeed!