



Mat Meditation: Training for Doggie Decompression

You may have heard the term "mat work" being thrown around in the training world. So what's this mysterious process all about?

Mats can be anything that your dog can lie down on; some people use a towel, a bathmat, a yoga mat, or whatever their dog prefers. It's preferable that it is somewhat portable, non-slip, and that your dog can easily lie down on it, and that you use the same one every time. "Mat work" refers to many different behaviors you can train using a mat. Many people use it as a station. When cued to "go to mat," the dog goes to the mat to await reinforcement, a great behavior if your dog barks at visitors or begs at the dinner table.

However, another way to use it is for DECOMPRESSION; aka helping dogs to relax. With people, you can encourage them to do deep breathing exercises, take a yoga class, or be mindful of their stress level, but how can you encourage a stressed dog to relax in a stressful environment? That's where "Relaxation on a Mat" comes in.

Relaxation on a Mat relies on two key facts:

1. Repeated pairing of a reinforcer (read: food) with a specific experience (like being on a mat) works to create a strong positive association with that experience.
2. If a dog is trained to ARTIFICIALLY offer "relaxed" behaviors when they are not relaxed yet (such as sighing, putting their chin on the ground or closing their eyes) their body *WILL* respond by relaxing (so cool!).

So how does it work?

1. **The first step is to establish the mat as a place where great things happen.** For now, as long as the dog is on the mat, they get a CONSTANT stream of food. A dog's regular meals are great for this. A cup of kibble can go a LONG way if delivered strategically! Just the act of eating is relaxing, and we offer the food in such a way that the dog is invited just to lie down and chow down. To demonstrate how effective this response can be, we took the highest arousal dog in the shelter and brought him to a distracting environment (outside) to try him on the mat for the first time. It took about 5 minutes for him to settle into a down (sped up for convenience). All it took was strategic food delivery. [Here's the video!](#)

Rinse and repeat! You can do this at mealtimes, and/or in between with extra small treats. Aim for about 2-5min at a time at first. The dog will begin to associate the arrival of the mat with good things, and will begin to offer downs faster and faster. Make sure to remove the mat when not in use.

2. **The second step is to begin to strategically reinforce (offer food) ONLY when you see the dog offering "relaxed" behaviors.** We don't use the clicker (it can be too exciting!) but instead use our TIMING to tell the dog what they did right. Once they start looking for what makes the food happen, it looks [like this](#).

You'll see the trainer only reinforcing when the dog offers a relaxed behavior, like chin on the floor. Many dogs start off as "Competitive Relaxers" aka "LOOK I'M SO RELAXED!" But as stated above, the body can't get away from its response to these actions! Artificial relaxation quickly becomes actual relaxation.

Important: Relaxation can come in tiny "pieces!" We won't get a dog lying fully prone on the first try. Which is why we will reward little "pieces" of the fully relaxed behavior. This can stop your dog from becoming frustrated, and give them clues as to what makes the food happen! We want them trying lots of things in hopes of getting the "right" answer. Some of these are obvious, but some are much more subtle. All of the following are moments you can reinforce (reward):

Overt	Subtle
Hipping over	Sniffing mat
Chin on ground	Looking away
Laying flat	Looking down
Big sigh	Stopping wagging
Stretching	Shifting weight
Yawning	Blinking (easy mode!)

Repeat this enough, and the mat itself becomes an unconscious cue for relaxation! From there the possibilities are endless. You can begin gradually moving mat practice to more and more distracting locations (back yard, front porch, street, etc.). Eventually, the goal is to be able to drop the mat anywhere (in the car, at a coffee shop, etc.) and have your dog trust that it is a "safe space" where they can relax.

Pro tips for Mat Meditation

- **Short sessions are better than long ones!** Once you are on step two, try for 2-5min at a time to start. Then take a break, remove the mat, and shower your dog with affection. Once your dog is actively offering relaxed behaviors, you can begin to space out how long you wait before reinforcing, and add more duration to your sessions.
- **Don't be afraid to pay for reeeeally subtle body language!** A blink, a sigh, a shift of weight, looking down, looking away, stopping wagging—all of these are reinforceable! Our goal is to "split" the

goal behavior (lying prone with eyes closed) into teeny pieces that we can reinforce. Gradually all those pieces get bigger as our dog realizes what we're asking. Remember, if your dog doesn't seem to be getting the hang of it, *split, don't quit!*

- **Smearing or crumbling your reinforcer** can lead to a dog accidentally putting a nose down to check if they've gotten all the treats. This is a great opportunity to catch them in that position and reinforce!
- **Try and pick low traffic/low energy times to practice at first.** When our dogs get the hang of it, we can add distractions, but for now we'll want to spend some time in kindergarten.
- **Strategic treat placement can help!** If your dog is sitting "sphinx" style, putting the treat down on the mat where they need to turn their head/upper body to get it can artificially encourage them into a "hip over." Placing a treat between a dog's front legs can encourage them into a "down" position, or help them stretch out their front legs to relax.
- **Don't react to undesirable behaviors like barking, nudging, pawing, etc.,** and instead wait for more desirable ones! Ideally we can try and anticipate when these are going to happen, and lower our criteria (aka, make it easier) so that we can get a higher rate of reinforcement. For example, if you see your dog alert on something and you had been waiting for a chin rest, instead pay for something easier like a weight shift or a look away *before they break position* to keep them in the game!

If you are looking to perfect this behavior, feel free to sign up for a private training session with one of our certified trainers! This behavior can be generalized to places your dog finds challenging, such as cars, cafes, dinner parties, and other distracting environments, and can be an invaluable tool for desensitization for dogs who experience fear and anxiety.