



Decompress for Success

As dog guardians, we are often faced with situations where our dogs have big feelings. Stress, fear, excitement, and anxiety can all lead to elevated levels of *cortisol*, a stress hormone that can contribute to bigger and more intense versions of your dog's behaviors. It can also hinder your ability to meet your dog's energy needs!

In behavior, there is a term used to describe the physical changes that occur when a dog is feeling a big emotion: "*arousal level*." A dog's arousal level describes *anything that increases their heart rate*.

Dogs face multiple potential triggers for arousal spikes every day in their environment. Barking dogs, garbage trucks, visitors, skateboards, motorcycles, and the vacuum cleaner to name a few. But dogs handle stress in different ways, depending on their confidence and personality.

We generally see dogs express an increase in arousal level in one of two ways; stressing UP or stressing DOWN. Just as humans respond to stress or excitement differently, dogs can show the same emotions in very different ways.



Stress can look like fear, anxiety, frustration, or even overexcitement!

Stressing UP

- Barking
- Jumping
- Zoomies/Pacing
- Mouthing (biting without pressure)
- Tearing up toys and objects

Stressing DOWN

- Hiding/self-isolating
- Not wanting to leave the "safety" of their bed
- Cowering/shaking
- Licking paws
- Exposing belly

Keep in mind, *not all these arousal spikes are "bad!"* Some might be stress-related, but many can center around things a dog finds desirable but overexciting, such as a well-loved visitor, or seeing you pick up the leash for a walk. Where we can get into trouble is *not addressing the side effects of those arousal spikes*—that is, the cortisol they can generate. If we amp a dog up, it's important to give them outlets that allow their bodies (and nervous system!) to relax.

"A tired dog is a good dog" looks different through the latest science.

For a long time, exhausting a dog through physical exercise was thought to be the best way to help dogs relax, and curb behaviors like excited jumping, or destroying household items. But what studies have shown is that physical exercise ALONE does not target the central nervous system of a dog in the same way that other decompression exercises do! Because of this, we recommend a more holistic approach.

To start, consider the following:

What behaviors or activities does my dog ENJOY, or choose to do when given a choice? Even undesirable behaviors such as digging in a garden or tearing up the garbage can provide useful data.

Are there breed-specific needs that you can help meet? Some dogs are more inherently reinforced (rewarded) by activities specific to their breed. Examples include herding, hunting, chasing, digging, swimming, and stalking.

Do they have favorite treats or toys? These preferences can help inform choices on the next page!

Does your dog have favorite locations or destinations? Do they like hiking, biking, and long walks on the beach, or are the outdoors intimidating? Night club dog or book club dog?

Decompression exercises

Every behavior your dog exhibits is trying to meet a need. And dogs have many hardwired behaviors that don't disappear just because they live with us! Dogs in the "wild" (feral or free roaming) can hunt, but will almost exclusively scavenge for their meals. These activities can involve behaviors like *sniffing, chasing, biting, dissecting, gnawing, and digging*. Sound familiar? 😊

Our dog's bodies don't stop pushing for those behaviors just because we provide their meals. This is why it is important to offer "legal" ways for our dogs to meet those biological impulses! Below are some of the easiest ways of helping your dog practice what are known as *species-typical behaviors*:

1. **Decompression walks, aka "Sniffaris."** This one might seem very simple, there are enormous benefits to dogs just using their noses. Studies have shown that for dogs there is a proportionate decrease in heart rate to time spent sniffing! It is our number one recommendation for dogs experiencing high levels of excitement, stress, or fear. So how does it work?
 - a. **Make sniffing the goal of your walk.** Really! Even more than exercise, sniffing is what gives dogs the most bang for your buck when trying to enrich (and tire out!) your dog.
 - b. **Try and choose locations where they can safely lead the way.** And they don't have to lead you very far! Even if you spend 30min sniffing the same 10sq feet, your dog is processing MILLIONS of scent receptors worth of information in every sniff. And that can be surprisingly physically tiring!

- c. **Let your equipment help.** What's the number one thing we recommend to ALL our training clients? A Biothane long line! These easily cleanable extra-long leashes are perfect for simulating off leash freedom without sacrificing on-leash safety. Our favorite local company is www.hightailhikes.com
- 2. **Foraging.** Sniffing with a twist! Dogs are natural foragers, and offering them the opportunity to snuffle treats or kibble out of an appropriate surface (such as grass or a snuffle mat) can not only slow down eating speed but can be a fun way to help lower heart rate. Scenarios where foraging can be useful:
 - a. Treats in a snuffle mat as desirable alternative to jumping when you enter the house
 - b. A temporary distraction as you attach equipment or pick up poop
 - c. A helpful way to decompress after a scary interaction on leash
- 3. **Food enrichment.** This is such a broad topic that we have an entire separate handout for it! You can view our [*Constructive Canine Enrichment handout*](#) in our free behavior library. Just like foraging, enrichment puzzles provide endless benefits, whether you are simply adding fun activities to your dog's routine, or using enrichment to help manage an unwanted behavior. There's a whole world out there, but here are some tips for enrichment to assist with decompression:
 - a. Licking is often a calming activity. Try lick mats/rubber toys stuffed with wet food, pumpkin, or yogurt.
 - b. Chewing can also be soothing for dogs. Nylabones, rubber bones, and edible chews are great options.
 - c. Freezing can help extend how long your dog spends working on a particular item!
 - d. Preferences are important to consider! Not all dogs love all types of enrichment—experiment!

"I came to this page looking for help fixing an unwanted behavior—why is all this relevant?"

The suggestions in this handout might not seem like they relate directly to behaviors like jumping, mouthing, destroying household items, barking, or other unwanted behaviors. But as stated above, ***every behavior relates to a NEED***. Meeting your dog's needs PROACTIVELY can make a profound impact on how they behave. It's vitally important to address the root causes of a dog's unwanted behaviors, rather than focusing only on the behaviors themselves. And STRESS is a contributing factor to almost every unwanted behavior we want to work on with our dogs.