
Relaxation and Stress Reduction

Relaxation exercises can be used every day, and in extreme situations. Relaxation exercises include touch, massage, learned relaxation through performing specific behaviours, and management of the environment.

Relaxed Down

By rewarding relaxation, you can teach your dog to control his own arousal level. There are several behaviours you can reward to encourage relaxation.

Focus on relaxation exercises, and teaching the dog emotional control with operant conditioning (using the clicker). The classes I designed for the Upper Valley Humane Society are based on impulse control first and foremost, rather than the basic behaviours sit, down and come. Once the dog has impulse control, we work on an automatic sit as the handler walks toward the dog, and a relaxed down when the handler stops to chat.

I have always included impulse and emotional control exercises in my classes, but I am putting greater emphasis on this area now. I recently started a pure "impulse and emotional control" class with some adult dogs. I am seeing good results, thanks to enthusiastic and dedicated owners. Some of these dogs are competitive obedience and agility dogs, but they lack impulse and emotional control. Impulse and emotional control exercises have also become an integral part of my puppy training classes.

It is interesting to compare similarities and differences in training "prey" vs. "predatory" species. The head lowering exercises that Alexandra Kurland does with horses for emotional control really got me thinking. Alexandra Kurland teaches horses to lower their heads right down to the ground on cue. Because horses only graze when they are totally relaxed with their surroundings, this position induces emotional calmness in otherwise stressed horses.

I wondered whether there was an equivalent position for dogs. What could I do with my dogs to trigger the same emotional control when they start to get "emotionally high"? When my dog is totally relaxed at home, he is in a down position on one hip, with his head stretched out on the

floor or between his paws, with total muscle relaxation. This was going to be my end goal: A relaxed down.

A relaxed down position helps calm the dog, as long as he is feeling secure. This exercise is a must for the classes with reactive dogs. (See Relaxed Down, Exercise ***)

A relaxed down can be lured or shaped. I used shaped this behaviour. I started with the dog in the down position and clicked for any movement of the head toward the ground. I gradually raised my criteria until I was only clicking for the head on the ground. This took about 5 minutes. I then added variable duration, counting 3 seconds, then 5 seconds, then 4 seconds, then 10 seconds, etc..

Dogs have a tendency lie down in the sphinx position, always ready to be released, ready for action. So I looked for a secondary behaviour to reinforce while building duration. This was the dog shifting over on his hip. As the duration increased, the dog settled into a more relaxed position by going over onto their hips. After a few clicks, the dog would lie down, put his head on the floor and rotate onto his hip. So, I had reached my second goal.

As I progressed with duration, the dog settled into a relaxed down position, understanding that he wasn't going to be doing anything anytime soon. As he began to relax his entire body, I clicked. My criteria now included relaxed muscles.

If your dog gets up every time you click, stop clicking and calmly use the word "good" and then reinforce. The word "good" is my "you're doing well, keep going" signal. Draw the word out as you are saying it, so it has a soothing tone. When the dog understands the exercise, begin to add controlled distractions. If the distractions become too much for the dog, use the word "good" to calm the dog. Then reduce the distraction to help the dog to relax.

This position should be highly reinforced, whether cued or offered freely by the dog. Use a cue such as "relax", which sounds appealing when in public and may naturally evoke a gentle tone of voice. By heavily reinforcing a relaxed down, it becomes default behaviour. The dog will naturally offer default behaviour whenever he is not quite sure what you want. For example, he may volunteer it in the kitchen, which is where treats are kept.

Train your dog it pays to relax by reinforcing him when he sighs deeply, a true sign of relaxation.

When I tether my youngest dog while working with another dog, she put herself into the relaxed down on her own. Instead of lying in a sphinx position, eagerly watching me work the other dog, she is in a relaxed position, quiet and calm. I reinforce this, to encourage it.

Massage

Performing massage on your canine friend can change how your dog feels about you, himself and the world. It can be relaxing for both of you.

You don't need to be a professionally trained masseuse. You just need to understand a few basics about where and how to touch. It is the time spent making quality physical and emotional contact that will make the difference. Massage is a quiet, relaxing way to bond with your dog.

Don't start if you are stressed, anxious or tired or running short on time. Set aside your personal concerns and worries; you want to completely involve yourself in this work. Make this a really pleasurable time for yourself as well as your dog. Set up the environment for success: Choose a comfortable and serene place, play soft music, and dim the lights.

Make sure you know how you want to touch your dog. There are excellent videos on canine massage and touch techniques that will help you feel more confident. (See the resource list in the appendix for excellent books and videos on canine massage/touch.) You don't need to be a professional. Your goal is to create a gentle, calm physical relationship between you and your dog, to build a positive relaxed physical response to touching your dog.

How you begin your massage determines the potential positive results. Some dogs, just like some people, may not like being touched. They may tense up and feel invaded or threatened. Take time to develop trust between you and your dog. Speak softly and kindly to the dog as you approach and present your hands fully and open. Don't move fast. Give the dog a chance to enjoy what you are going to do together.

If you need to help your dog stay in one place, give him something to chew on. Listen to the dog's breathing pattern as you start so you can tell when he begins to relax. Make sure your hands are warm. Feel how his body reacts to your touch: Does he tense, flinch, pull away or just stay

rigid? Be very calm, slow, and gentle in your touch until you can feel him begin to relax.

Start on the muzzle and head first, then the back of the ears and head. Go slowly; let the dog tell you when you can leave the head. Gently bring your hand down his neck, then continue down his wither (top point of the shoulders). Don't lift your hands off one part of the body and put them down on another part. Lightly slide your hand to a new location so your dog knows where the next touching will happen. Don't make any surprises for your dog.

Be fully focused on how your dog is reacting. Massage teaches your hands and eyes how to "read" your dog. Learn to recognize his signs of apprehension, such as raising or turning his head toward you, or widening or dilating his eyes.

Massage gives you a chance to be sure your dog is not in a pain from disease or injury. Take note of where you are touching if your dog becomes tense and seems to want to move away. Note if his breathing is short and hard, if he is whimpering, or if he makes a short yelping sound. Pay attention to any sudden reactive jolts or tension as you touch him. If you sense pain, determine whether he may need medical attention.

Learn how your dog shows you he is relaxed. Are his eyes half closed, head held down, ears to the sides of his head? Is he making heavy sighs, sure signs of relaxation and enjoyment? If you monitor your dog's body language all the time you are touching him, you can adjust your massage techniques accordingly.