



Understanding Thresholds

What does it mean when a trainer says “work your dog under threshold”?

In the context of dog training, a threshold is the point at which a dog becomes too overwhelmed by their emotions to allow for learning to happen. Working your dog under threshold refers to keeping them in a state where they are calm enough to be able to process information effectively. The dog needs to be aware of a trigger’s presence, but not at a level of distress where they are reacting.

Stress Responses & Identifying Your Dog’s Threshold

Finding the threshold line without stepping over it can be tough at first. Different dogs show stress differently. A dog may appear to have an emotional explosion come “out of nowhere” because their warning signs as they reached their threshold were more subtle. Just because your dog isn’t barking, doesn’t mean they are under their threshold.

Dogs exhibit a wide range of stress responses. Most people have heard of Fight of Flight mode. Or maybe Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn. For dogs it’s more like **fight, flight, freeze, or fidget/fool around**.

So for some dogs, over threshold may mean they are barking, lunging, or growling, but for others it may mean they are crouched down, tail tucked, panting, and shaking, and for others still, it may mean they are engaging in displacement behaviors like scratching/licking themselves, spinning around, or doing zoomies. You may also see involuntary physiological responses like drooling, rapid shedding (“blowing their coat”), or dilated pupils.

The Aftermath of a Reactive Event & Trigger Stacking

After a dog comes back from survival/reactive mode, the dog’s body attempts to return to normalcy. They may shake off to release some tension and their body will begin to look more relaxed again. However, on a non-visible level, your dog’s stress hormone levels will still be elevated. During this time, the likelihood of them reacting again is increased.

When a dog is faced with multiple stressors, the body can continue to release stress hormones which build up and can take days to dissipate. Reactions during the time when the hormones are still elevated may be more severe.

A dog that is already stressed from being in an uncomfortable environment like at the vet, who is then exposed to lots of handling, poking and prodding, may then be set off by something they normally wouldn't be like encountering an unfamiliar dog in the lobby on the way out. The dog was simply the last straw.

Another example is your dog at a park. There are kids running around with balloons and balloons are a little strange but your dog seems okay. Then there is a group of people on bikes and that is a little scary and your dog tucks their tail for a little bit but then it comes back up again and your dog still seems okay. Then there are some squirrels up in a tree which while not negative or scary, increase your dog's arousal levels. Your dog's tail is held high at this point but is still wagging so you think all is well. You encounter another dog who barks loudly as it passes you and your dog. Your dog whines a little about this but seems overall fine. Lastly a stranger comes up and asks to pet your dog. Your dog has never had an issue with people so of course you say yes. So then a stranger is reaching towards your dog and you don't notice but they have a lanyard hanging around their neck and as they bend over towards your dog, the lanyard swings towards your dog's face and that is the last straw: your dog lets out a quick but loud bark and snaps at the outstretched hand reaching towards it. This is called Trigger Stacking.

Like the squirrel in the above example, it is important to remember that triggers are not always "scary" or bad things. Anything that raises arousal levels can add to the stack, whether that be the doorbell ringing, an intense game of fetch, or a long playdate.

Just like with humans, repeated exposure to high levels of stress can have long term effects on over health and well-being. Managing exposure to triggers is a crucial part of reactivity training.

Managing Thresholds During Training

When working with a reactive, overexcited, or fearful dog, it's crucial to manage the three main factors affecting thresholds:

- **Distance:** Maintain a safe distance from triggers to prevent your dog from becoming overwhelmed.
- **Duration:** Limit exposure to triggers to short, manageable sessions to prevent trigger stacking and burnout.
- **Intensity:** Gradually increase exposure to triggers in a controlled manner to desensitize your dog over time.

Distance - Distance refers to the physical space between your dog and the trigger (e.g., another dog, a person, or a specific environment). The appropriate distance varies for each dog and situation, depending on their level of reactivity.

- **Determining Optimal Distance:** Start at a distance where your dog notices the trigger but remains calm and able to focus on you (sub-threshold). This might be quite far initially, especially for highly reactive dogs.
- **Gradual Decrease in Distance:** Over time, gradually decrease the distance to the trigger in small increments (e.g., a few feet at a time). This process, known as desensitization, allows your dog to acclimate to the trigger gradually without triggering a reactive response.
- **Observation and Adjustment:** Continuously monitor your dog's body language and behavior. If you notice signs of stress or reactivity, increase the distance to a more manageable level where your dog can remain calm.

Duration - Duration refers to the length of time your dog is exposed to the trigger during training sessions.

- **Short Sessions:** Keep training sessions short and focused to prevent trigger stacking and mental fatigue. Starting with sessions as brief as a few minutes can help maintain your dog's focus and prevent them from becoming overwhelmed.
- **Incremental Increases:** Gradually increase the duration of exposure to the trigger as your dog becomes more comfortable and responsive. However, always prioritize quality over quantity; shorter, successful sessions are more beneficial than longer, stressful ones.
- **Recognizing Limits:** Pay attention to your dog's signals of discomfort or stress, such as yawning, lip licking, or trying to move away. These are indications that your dog may be reaching their threshold, and it's important to end the session before they become reactive.

Intensity - Intensity refers to the level of stimulus or arousal triggered by the environment or specific stimuli.

- **Gradual Exposure:** Introduce triggers at a low intensity initially. For example, if your dog is reactive to other dogs, start with calm dogs that are stationary or walking calmly versus an excited dog who is jumping around or barking. If the trigger is a doorbell or a thunderclap, make a recording of the sound to play for your dog at a lower volume.
- **Increasing Complexity:** As your dog becomes more comfortable and shows improved responses, gradually increase the intensity by exposing them to more challenging stimuli (e.g., dogs that are closer or more active).
- **Managing Multiple Triggers:** Be mindful of cumulative stress from multiple triggers (trigger stacking). Manage sessions to avoid exposing your dog to too many triggers in quick succession, which can overwhelm them and increase reactivity.

By carefully managing these factors during training sessions and employing techniques like the Look at That Game, trainers and owners can effectively implement behavior modification protocols and help their dogs develop new and positive associations with previously triggering stimuli, improving their overall quality of life and well-being.