Barking & Lunging & Snarling, Oh My!

What is the behavior?

Your dog barks, lunges and snarls at other dogs or people he sees when out on a leash walk! It looks scary and is embarrassing to have a dog that acts in such a way. What's wrong with him?

This behavior – barking, lunging, and snarling at another animal or person - goes by many names. Leash aggression, leash frustration and/or leash reactivity are all used somewhat interchangeably when discussing this particular behavior. The term "leash reactive" is probably the most accurate. Your dog reacts (or over reacts) to something in his environment and it triggers an unwanted response. It is usually a defensive reaction based on fear rather than proactive aggression.

Why does it happen?

There can be several reasons for a dog to become leash reactive. A traumatic event such as a dog attack or even lack of proper early socialization can cause a dog to be overly fearful of other dogs. Genetically shy dogs may be more susceptible to these traumatic events. Lack of proper training can cause an otherwise friendly dog to become frustrated when he can't do what he is normally allowed to do; run up and greet any dog he sees. (Please review our ***Off Leash*** handout.) In either case a dog becomes leash reactive when a trigger he sees in his environment sets off a reaction because of frustration or fear.

The Frustration Version: A normally friendly, out-going, confident dog is out walking with his guardian and sees another dog or person that he wants to meet. He (the dog) starts off in that direction, but his owner is not interested and holds him back with the leash. The dog keeps trying to get where he wants to go. Frustrated at being constrained, he begins to lunge and bark. After a few such experiences, a pattern develops and whenever the dog sees a person or other dog, the barking and lunging commences.

The Fearful Version: A shy, fearful or cautious dog encounters something in his environment that worries or scares him. It could be another dog, a bike, or a child running. His first reaction is to try to move away, but his guardian keeps walking toward the scary thing. The shy dog starts to lunge and bark at the scary thing, telling it to stay away. This behavior is reinforced because eventually, the scary thing goes away and the dog thinks that his barking and lunging scared it off. So now he knows exactly what to do the next time he sees a scary thing.

In both these scenarios, the trigger (the dog or person or the scary thing) causes the dog to go "over-threshold" and react to the trigger by lunging, barking or growling. He seems, and actually is, out of control. The only thing that works at that point is to move away. Taking your dog out for a walk is no longer fun, in fact you dread the very thought. You start walking very late at night or early in the morning or not at all. This is not how it was supposed to be!

How can you modify this behavior?
Fortunately, you don't have to keep on with the midnight walks, or wishing and hoping that you don't see another dog or person on your walk forever. There is hope for you and your dog. It takes a combination of management strategies, relationship building and professional training assistance. It then takes time and patience and practice, practice, practice. And YES, you do need to try and change this behavior, because it will get worse and could escalate to the point where your dog injures another dog or person, including you.

Your first goal is to learn how to identify when your dog is approaching "threshold" (the moment when he sees a trigger, but has not yet reacted with lunging and barking). Once you can recognize his triggers and identify his threshold at any given time you will be able to begin the process of teaching him an acceptable alternative response. You have to be ready to use the tools and techniques you learn to prevent that reaction or change his perceptions of the trigger.

Management

The training tips that you will learn focus on getting and keeping your dog's attention. Using proper equipment when you are leash walking or driving can help with this. (Please see our ***Walking Equipment*** and ***Walking with Your Dog*** handouts.)

Equipment: You may end up using some combination of the following equipment:

- Leash and/or 10' – 15'Long Line. We discourage the use of Flexi-leads because the plastic handle can be cumbersome and they aren't as safe to use as a long line.
- Harness with both a front and back walking clip. Some good examples might be the Balance Harness, the Freedom No Pull Harness or the Xtra Dog Harness.
- Head Halter
- Calming Cap (Please review our ***Calming Cap*** handout.)
- Crate (Please review our ***Crate Training*** handout.)
- Tie Downs (Please review our ***Tie Down*** handout.)

Environmental Management: It is imperative to manage your dog in the home, in the car and while on walks so he isn't reacting or "going over threshold" at any time. (Please review our ***Territory – My Space!*** handout for management tips.)

- If your dog barks in the car at all, we recommend that he ride in a crate. You may also need a cover over the crate. If you absolutely cannot use a crate, other options include strategic tie down or Calming Cap use.
- In the house, your dog should not be allowed in places where he can bark at other dogs or people from windows or the yard.
- Choose your walks with great care. Avoid areas that are congested with dogs and people or where your dog is practicing reactive behaviors. This can be very challenging and will likely involve a lifestyle or pattern change on your part, at least for a period of time.
- You may need to consider alternative methods to exercise your dog. We encourage dog/handler play both as a means of exercise and as a relationship builder. (Please review our ***Play – Tug & Retrieving Games*** handout.)
- Be as aware of the environment as is your dog. Look ahead and occasionally check behind you. Is another dog, child, bike or other potential trigger in the area? If you are in a particularly busy area, these triggers can accumulate such that your dog is always just on the edge of reacting. If so, you need to be ready to act in order to PREVENT a reaction or consider a quieter location.

Relationship

Building a good, trusting relationship with your dog is critical. You want him to view you as the leader, the protector, and the one who knows what to do. Your dog just wants to be safe and enjoy himself, and if he doesn't think you will provide that, he will do it himself by lunging, barking and snarling at the trigger.

- **Build Trust:** Positive reinforcement based training teaches your dog to trust you and to enjoy working with you. You both gain much needed inter-species communication skills. Professional dog training classes with a good instructor will help you learn how to communicate with clarity and kindness. The training you do will go a long way towards building your relationship and bond.
- **Learn to Read Body Language:** Learn about your dog through careful observation. Follow him around the yard; observe him in play and on walks. Tune in to what he is doing and these observation skills will serve you in good stead during your training sessions. (Please review our ***Body Language – Speaking "Dog"*** handout.)
- **Relax!** Teach your dog how to relax in the face of environmental stimulation. Dogs who are overly aroused or fearful are not in a position to learn. Dr. Karen Overall has created a very comprehensive, readily available handout, "Protocol for Relaxation", that is highly recommended.
- **Identify Triggers:** Learn exactly what the triggers are for your dog. Is it all dogs, or certain breeds or sizes? How close does the trigger have to be before your dog reacts? What are his body language signals for distress? Most dogs give fair warning before they erupt. You have to be observant to know the signs.
- **Play with Your Dog!** Teach your dog scenting games, fetch and tug games, puzzle games and other games you can play in your yard or home (where you don't have to worry about him reacting). Nose Work (Scenting) classes are also great fun for a reactive dog since only one dog works at a time and his own nose focuses his attention. Games not only relieve tension and help focus your dog, but can be used as training rewards.

Training

Foundation Training Exercises: Train the following basic behaviors so that you and your dog can execute them fluidly in distracting environments. During this period avoid situations that will trigger the barking and lunging behaviors. Please review the ***Marker & Release Cues*** handout before you begin.

- ***Name Recognition:*** Your dog will turn his head and look at you when you call his name. Please review our ***Attention*** handout for detailed training instructions.
- ***Sit:*** He sits the first time you ask and will remain in the behavior until released by his handler. Please review our ***Sit*** handout.
- ***Find It*****:** Upon hearing the cue, your dog begins to search the ground for a tossed treat. Please review our ***Find It*** handout.

Transitional Training Exercises: The U-Turn and the L-Turn are patterned behaviors that teach your dog to quickly follow as you change directions; either to go back the way you came or to make a sharp turn to the right or left. The goal is to create distance and give your dog an alternative behavior. The following exercises can be taught, practiced and rewarded under distracting, but not over-stimulating conditions.

It is important to remember that you are not pulling your dog to follow you. You start by luring him. Pulling on a leashed dog often makes him want to pull more against the leash and can quickly escalate the situation. This is why it is important to practice this so your dog learns to follow you when there are no distractions; so when there *is* a distraction (his trigger) he knows what to do and so do you!

U-Turn**:** In the U-turn, you and your dog move together to quickly reverse your direction in a 180-degree turn. It is useful in "emergency" situations such as when a trigger suddenly appears and you need to quickly get away (increase distance).

1. If your dog is walking on your left side, have an excellent treat to use as a lure in your left hand. You may need to use your right hand to feed treats into your left hand, as your leash is likely to be in your left hand as well.
2. As you walk straight ahead, place the lure on your dog's nose (so he will follow it).
3. Upon seeing the other dog or person (trigger) in the distance, give the cue, "Max, This Way" and quickly turn around and walk in the other direction with your dog still at your left side, still with his nose on the lure (treat).
4. Mark (reward) the turn ***(Please review our Marker and Release Cues handout)*** and deliver the treat at your side as you walk away. You are essentially rewarding both the turn away and the increased distance from the other dog (trigger.)
5. You want to make sure that as you are turning around your dog is closely following the lure.
6. Reverse instructions if your dog is on your right side.
7. Eventually, with consistent practice you may be able to eliminate the lure and use only a "This Way" cue to indicate you are turning.

L-Turn: The L-turn is a 90-degree change of direction to the left or to the right. It can be used when you want to get off to the side of a trail or up a driveway in order to get some distance between you and an oncoming trigger. It also helps to redirect your dog's eye contact from the approaching trigger.

1. If your dog is on your left, it is easiest to have the lure in your right hand.
2. Upon seeing a trigger, move the lure to your dog's nose, cue "Come" while you make a 90-degree turn to the side.
3. Take several steps backwards (to increase distance) while luring your dog toward you.
4. Once you are far enough off to the side, and your dog is in front of you facing away from the trigger, cue the "Sit."
5. While the dog or person walks by, continue to reward with treats at a high rate.
6. Once the trigger is gone, release from "Sit" and continue walking.

These exercises are used to ask your dog to focus on the handler to the exclusion of other environmental distractions. They are best used in a trainer facilitated behavior modification program that includes desensitization and counterconditioning. (Please review our ***Counterconditioning*** handout.)

Advanced Training Techniques:

Abandonment training: The objective in abandonment training is to teach your dog that you will not be there to back him up if he lunges, barks, snarls or otherwise attempts to attack another dog. You teach your dog the "Bye" or "Later" cue and that he has the option to leave with you. Abandonment training is more effective with a dog who has a strong connection with his owner and who wants to be with her and, in fact, would not like being left (abandoned).

Teaching the Cue: Make sure this training takes place in a safe, relatively calm environment. Pick a word like "Bye" or "Later" to use as a cue that informs your dog that you are leaving. Avoid using "No" as it is too generic and has negative connotations.

1. Use a 6-8 foot leash. Knot the leash about 18 inches to 2 feet from the clasp that attaches to the collar.
2. For a dog on the left, hold the knot with the left hand and the loop handle with your right hand. (Opposite for a dog on the right.) Your dog should be able to walk beside you and about a foot behind you or in front of you without pulling on the leash.
3. As you walk your dog, watch his head and body language very carefully.
4. As soon as he loses attention on you—walks ahead, to your side, or looks away—say your cue ("bye" or "later") and let go of the knot, but keep the loop in your right hand.
5. Hold on to the looped end while you quickly change directions.
6. "Mark" your dog when he gets to your side. Reinforce heavily with praise and a treat "jackpot."
7. Practice many times until his reaction to your verbal cue is automatic.

Add a Tactile Element to the Cue: Sometimes, life happens and your dog becomes too engrossed in watching another dog or person and he appears "not to hear" your verbal "Bye" or "Later" cue.

1. If he loses attention on you—walks ahead, to the side or looks away—give your cue "Bye" or "Later" and place the slack of the leash on his back. This becomes a tactile signal for your dog that supports and strengthens the verbal cue.
2. When the leash is on his back, immediately back up.
3. Do not stop backing up until your dog comes to you.
4. Reinforce with lavish praise and a treat jackpot.

Abandonment Exercise: This should be practiced with an experienced trainer in conjunction with a comprehensive behavior modification program. Before you begin, you should be very familiar with your dog's precursor signals to aggression (raised hackles, staring, ears forward, growling). You will also need a decoy dog who is very reliable and will not react to your dog's aggressive signals. Finally, you need to be able to accurately predict when your dog will overreact.

1. Attach two leashes on your dog, a regular 6-8 foot leash and a long line. You hold the short leash and your trainer has the long line as a safety line.
2. You approach the decoy dog carefully and watch for the stress signals from your dog.
3. At the first sign of an overreaction, say your cue (which you have practiced many times), put the leash on his back and back up and RUN AWAY.
4. When he realizes you are leaving, he should quickly follow you. This is where your strong bond with your dog comes into play.
5. Heap lavish praise on you dog when he catches you.
6. Over time, your dog expects to move away from the trigger.

Look at that! This is an advanced cue for your dog that tries to change the way your dog feels about other dogs or people (trigger). In this protocol, your dog is rewarded for looking at the trigger. Essentially, you try to change the reason why your dog looks at a trigger from "it is scary" to "It is fun and rewarding." The technique works best on dogs who have a solid grounding in positive reinforcement training, markers and understand "the training game."

The timing of the marker is critical to the success of this cue. In this exercise, you allow your dog a quick glance at the trigger before he looks back at you. In the previous exercises described above you are asking your dog to look at you and not the trigger, whether he has seen it or not, so he won't react.

You can start practicing at home with things/people that are not triggers, but that he is likely to notice and look at. This will also help you get your timing down. It can be a confidence builder for your dog to be able to see a trigger and instead of getting over-stimulated; he turns around and gets a treat. When your dog is looking at an actual trigger, make sure it is far enough away (under-threshold) that he will not have a negative reaction.

1. You allow your dog to look at the trigger.
2. Mark his look with the "Yes" (or other marker) and when he automatically looks at you (because he heard "Yes") you reward him.
3. Practice until he gets to the point that when he sees a trigger and automatically looks at you can add a verbal cue such as "Look."
4. You have changed the trigger from a source of stress into a game of sorts.

Constructional Aggression Treatment (CAT): CAT is a protocol in which the dog is presented with a trigger at a distance that causes a stressful reaction, but not a full-blown reaction. The dog reacts with early stress signals such as stiffening, looking, barking, etc. The decoy stays put and waits for the dog to offer alternate behaviors such as cessation of barking, sniffing or looking away, at which time the trigger moves away. The guardian does not interact with her dog at all. The idea behind CAT is the dog learns that his reactive and aggressive display no longer makes the trigger go away, but his calming behaviors do.

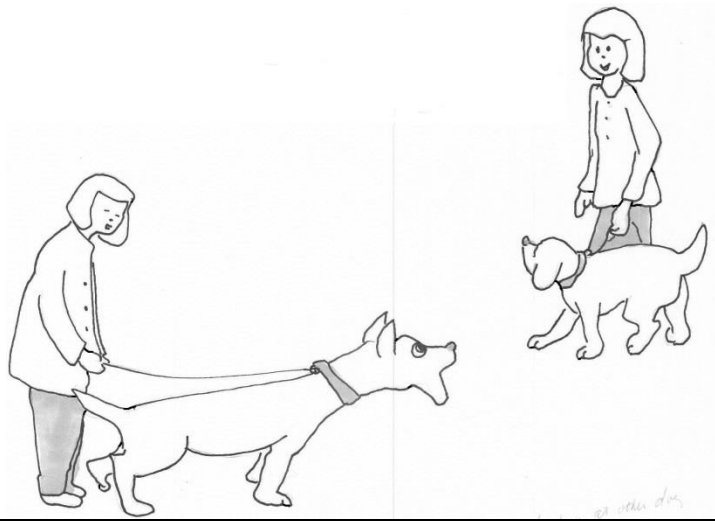
One criticism of the CAT protocol is the level of stress that the working dog goes through during the exercise sessions. The sessions can last an hour or more and the dog is presented with a stressful situation (the trigger) many times over the course of the session.

Key points in CAT:

- It is recommended that the exercises be repeated several times a day over a period of approximately three consecutive days. How long it actually takes depends on the dog, the intensity of his reaction and how well he works under stress.
- During the sessions the handler does not try to redirect the dog or otherwise interact with him.
- It's important to keep the subject dog's reaction at a low arousal level.
- When the subject dog presents a calming behavior, the trigger moves away (functional reward), not the subject dog.
- The timing for the removal of the trigger is crucial, because no marker is used.
- You need a strong understanding of your dog's temperament and stress signals.
- The decoy/trigger dogs need to be reliable and non-reactive. Because it can be stressful for them it is best to have several dogs take turns working.

A CAT Exercise: (for a dog who overly reacts to other dogs) The exercise is set up in an environment where the dog is likely to display the negative reaction. The working dog may be tethered. The handler is there but does not interact or mark any specific behavior while the exercise is going on. Between exercises she may interact with her dog.

1. A trigger decoy is presented at a distance where the working dog shows the first signs of stress.
2. The trigger decoy remains in position until the working dog displays alternate calming behaviors such as looking around, changing body position or sniffing. Then the decoy moves away (functional reward).
3. This process is repeated several times. When the working dog immediately offers alternate behaviors upon seeing the trigger a "level" has been cleared. The trigger can then be stationed a little closer and the exercise repeated as needed. How long each level takes depends on the dog and the intensity of his reactions. Don't rush it!
4. At some point the "switchover" point will occur. This is the moment when the working dog will start offering friendly/playful signals toward the trigger. The trigger can continue advancing in small increments until the trigger and the working dog actually meet. This can be one ultimate goal of the CAT exercises.



Behavior Adjustment Training (BAT): BAT also employs the concept of a functional reward in addition to some food or toy rewards if appropriate. BAT is a protocol in which your dog is kept far enough away from the trigger so he does not react in a negative way—lunging or barking. He sees the trigger at what he perceives to be a safe distance, gathers information and indicates when he has disengaged from the trigger with body language such as ear flick, sniffing or head turns. He earns the functional reward of moving away (increasing distance). The strategy of keeping the dog under-threshold helps to create a lower level of stress in your dog while he learns a better, more rewarding way to act around triggers. The goal is to avoid letting the dog become so stressed that he resorts to lunging and barking.

Key points in BAT:

- An important part of the program is the leash handling techniques you will learn which will help you control your dog without jerking and pulling on him. You will learn these techniques using a much longer leash—up to 15 feet. These techniques will aid you when you walk your dog on your own.
- The BAT lessons can be taught in a small group setting (up to 6 client dogs and 6 helper dogs) or one-on-one. The helper dogs and handlers are used as part of a variety of controlled exercises you and your dog will go through to help him overcome his reaction to triggers. If you are working one-on-one, your trainer will set up exercises with decoy dogs.
- The exercises are carefully set up so your dog isn't likely to go over-threshold. He should have many relatively stress-free opportunities to practice acceptable behavior (stop, gather information, move away). You are an integral part of the training and will also have opportunities to practice your new skills of directing, leash handling and reading dog body language.
- The number of lessons needed depends on the intensity of the problem and your own training experience, confidence and ability to read your dog's body language.

A BAT Exercise: Choose an outdoor area that is very spacious, not overly stimulating (lots of noises, traffic, people, etc.) and where there are a variety of exits. This exercise also utilizes a calm, non-reactive decoy dog as a training partner.

1. The decoy dog is presented at a distance that prompts mild curiosity from your dog, but does not trigger a negative display.
2. Using your long line as a loose leash, meander in a random pattern in the general direction of the decoy dog until curiosity sets in (your dog walks a little faster or notices the other dog).
3. Gently stop your dog when he is interested, but not focused on the trigger (dog or person).
4. Once your dog is stopped, rock forward to take pressure off the leash.
5. Observe your dog while he is gathering information (looking and air sniffing) about the other dog. At any sign of disengagement—looking away, sniffing the ground, yawning, ear flicking—mark that behavior with a "Yes" or click and move some distance away from the trigger. (Space or increased distance is the functional reward).
6. An optional, additional reward of food or toy play can be added for use when you are not working your dog in a controlled setting, such as when you are on a walk.

Over time, your dog learns that the situation is no longer stressful and that he can control how he feels by stopping and moving away from "the scary thing."

All of these techniques and exercises should be employed with the assistance of a dog training professional and used after careful assessment of which tools will best benefit your dog. Not all of these techniques are appropriate for all dogs. Remember to look at these situations from your dog's point of view. You may find yourself more sympathetic once you understand why your dog has been making such a spectacle of your walk.

Training Tips:

- Be prepared with whatever tools you need before you embark on a walk. Understand that this is really a training session and have a plan!
- If your plan falls apart because "life happens," retreat and learn from the experience. This might mean choosing an even less stimulating environment. Keep in mind that you don't want your dog to practice behavior that you are trying to eliminate.
- Exercise your dog separately from your training walk.

Training Resources:

Marin Humane's **Behavior & Training** conducts various training classes. Sign up on our Behavior & Training page for the next available class series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org.

Remember to license your dog (It's the LAW)! If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog's collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn't require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by **Marin Humane**, visit us at MarinHumane.org or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.