

## **Behaviour Tips: Encouraging relaxing behaviours in anxious/active dogs**

**How do I know if my dog is anxious?** An anxious dog consistently and reliably shows an increased activity level, vigilance, and scanning behaviour. These behaviours may always exist at some level, but become especially pronounced if there is a change in environment or stimulation. Additionally, you may notice increases in heart rate (pulse) and respiratory rate (panting). Anxiety interferes with participation in normal activities and normal social behaviours.

Anxious dogs find it difficult to learn to ignore anything that might be contributing to their anxiety. Instead – they respond to all new experiences by becoming more anxious where they are unwilling or unable to sit or lie down voluntarily.

Of note, these dogs *can* sleep effectively when they feel safe and secure, but they may often wake up for even small disturbances – patterns that can be noted using activity monitors and video. Clients often report that these dogs sleep with fewer disturbances, sleep longer and sleep more deeply after treatment.

Interestingly, exercise does not “fix” these dogs - they don’t respond well to exercise as a way to reduce their anxious behaviours in any way useful to them, although the exercise may be exhausting. As soon as they awaken, they are just as anxious as always.

**How can I get my anxious dog to relax?** Often, anxious dogs require both medication and work with behaviour modification in order to reduce their unwanted behaviours. See your local veterinarian and work together with them to set up a plan for your dog, ensuring that they get both the type of behaviour modification and medication needed to set them on the path of rehabilitation.

Behaviour modification can include teaching them to take their cues from you so that when they feel the need to monitor, they look at you, instead and take a deep breath. Focus exercises – where the dogs focus on a short, calming task instead of engaging in vigilance and scanning – may help these dogs a lot. To do the behaviour modification best, dogs may need medication.

**Is my dog overactive or hyperactive?** An *overactive dog* is one that is excessively active, but is not worried. In this case, activity will generally resolve with increased exercise and activity. Although active, they are generally able to rest effectively and sleep through the night. Overactive dogs simply need different management than other dogs – better and more cognitive and physical exercise helps their pacing and activity to lessen.

A *hyperactive dog* is a dog whose activity level is excessive for their age and level of stimulation. Hyperactivity does not generally respond to restraint or training, alone. These dogs range from the truly hyperkinetic dogs which have abnormal heart rate and temperature set points to the dogs that may have more normal physiology but cannot focus, engage in any activity consistently or for a long time, or rest effectively.

Many people find hyperactive dogs to be “annoying”. Typical signs will include barking or whining, lack of focus, and inattentiveness to training. Hyperactive dogs can destroy household items like toys or furniture, not because they are distressed or destructive, but simply because they are excessively active and distracted about most of their behaviours.

**How can I get my active dog to relax?** Punishment is not behaviour modification and is counter-productive. Stimulating “replacement behaviours” through methods such as environmental enrichment and alternative behaviour training are methods that are proven to help encourage more appropriate behaviour in dogs. Here – rather than bouncing around grabbing everything on a walk, your active dog may

learn to carry a big toy in their mouth (a “replacement behaviour”) when she walks so that she can chew it when she gets distracted. Your veterinarian can help you create a detailed behaviour modification plan and will know if you need medication to enhance focus and help it to succeed.

**Effective training for relaxation** The most effective way to shape a dog’s behaviour through training is to focus on the following three goals: (1) enhancing wanted behaviours, (2) stimulating the learning of replacement behaviours, and (3) making it easier for your dog to express natural social behaviours. Training that involves coercive, scary, or painful techniques should be avoided. They damage the dog and do not effectively change the underlying mental and/or emotional states to which your dog is reacting.

**Enhancing wanted behaviours in dogs** Even when dealing with an active or anxious dog, there will still be some behaviours they express that are desirable, both for the dog and the owner. This may include behaviours such as fetching a ball or sitting close to you for some cuddle time. Even sleeping may be a behaviour that you like. These kinds of behaviours should be encouraged and rewarded, as they are non-destructive and helpful both to dog and owner. Encouraging and rewarding can occur in many different forms, such as providing treats or physical contact, or even talking to your dog in a kind and warm voice when they show the behaviours you want them to express. The goal is to make your dog understand that the particular behaviour can be associated with happiness and encouragement, rather than something that makes their owner upset.

**Teaching Replacement Behaviours** Teaching replacement behaviours first involves enriching the environment from the perspective of your dog. This could mean providing alternative means of expressing a behaviour. For example, if your dog often chews on household items such as shoes, you can enrich the environment with appropriate chew toys so that this behaviour can be expressed more appropriately.

Training an alternate behaviour is teaching your dog to replace an inappropriate behaviour with one that is more appropriate. For example, you may find that your dog tends to dig in your flower beds when in the yard. Using appropriate training techniques, you might shape this behaviour into something less destructive. For example, you might train your dog to “give their paw”, or explore the yard in a non-destructive way to find hidden treats or scents, rather than through digging behavior.

**Encouraging Social Behaviours** Dogs are social animals, and they typically enjoy being around others in a way that makes them feel safe and cared for. When a dog is able to express normal social behaviours, they feel more relaxed and are able to both focus and learn much better. A good way to start is to give your dog a space where they can relax and learn to enjoy a calm environment. Certain techniques promote relaxation and focus as well, such as cognitive training techniques like puzzle toys or teaching complex tricks/behaviours. The more a dog’s mind is put to use, the more effective they become at using it.

Keep in mind that social behaviours don’t necessarily require other dogs to be present - expressing good, calm, interactive social behaviours around humans can be just as effective.

*Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services ([www.dacvb.org](http://www.dacvb.org)). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service ([AVCBehaviouralMed@upe](mailto:AVCBehaviouralMed@upe)).*