



# My dog is reactive to dogs

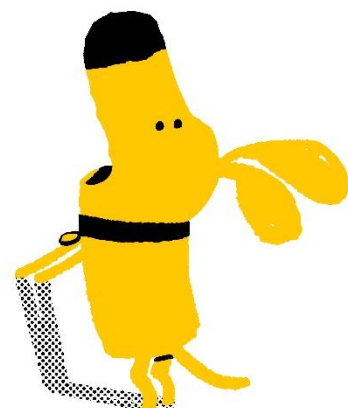
Walkies should be an enriching and fun time for our dogs, and enjoyable for owners too! However, for some dogs the very presence of another dog in their immediate surroundings can make them feel very uncomfortable. This can be incredibly disheartening and distressing for owners, who just want their dogs to have a nice time. If your dog feels like this don't worry, there are many ways to help your dog feel better.

## What do we mean **by reactive?**

Owners might typically describe their dog as reactive if they bark or lunge towards other dogs.

When dogs feel worried or frustrated, they might behave in any, or all, of the following ways:

- lunging forwards on lead
- barking at the other dog
- growling/snarling/displaying teeth towards the other dog
- bouncing up and down on the lead
- grabbing their lead between their teeth and ragging it back and forth
- grabbing their owner's clothing or body
- nipping another dog that they are being walked with
- trying to hide behind their owner or between their owner's legs
- trying to jump up into their owner's arms
- pulling away



## Why do dogs **behave like this?**

To develop social skills, a puppy needs to be carefully exposed to a variety of dogs of different shapes, sizes, and ages, so they learn the best way to communicate appropriately with all manner of dogs. Some dogs might not have had such a positive 'puppy education' and may lack social skills, simply because they haven't had the opportunity to learn how best to communicate.

Other dogs might have had a bad experience during an interaction with another dog, or group of dogs. Becoming frightened or overwhelmed may make them feel vulnerable when they encounter dogs again. Unfortunately, this can happen at any point during a dog's life, so even a well socialised dog can become worried by other dogs if they have a traumatic experience!

On the other hand, there are some dogs who've had plenty of experience interacting with other dogs whenever they've liked, without any regulation. To the point at which they now expect to be able to interact with every dog they come across! This can mean that when they encounter another dog and are unable to interact with them, they become frustrated as their expectation isn't realised.



The behaviour of a **fearful or anxious dog** is aimed at making them feel safe again, by increasing the distance between themselves and the dog who they perceive to be threatening. Where this behaviour results in the other dog moving away, which they inevitably will if, for example, they are being walked along the other side of the road, then the dog learns that barking and lunging is successful. Therefore, the next time they want to make another dog go away they're likely to behave in this way again.

Some worried or frightened dogs will try to increase the distance between themselves and the dog that is worrying them by running away and avoiding them all together. In doing so they might put themselves and their owners in dangerous situations, for example by running across the road to avoid another dog. A worried dog who can't avoid another dog, because they're on lead for example, might also be frustrated by this, so emotions can sometimes be mixed and complex!

The behaviour of a **frustrated dog** is usually a visual and noisy expression of the way they are feeling. They desperately want to interact with or avoid the other dog, however, are unable to do so because they are on lead.

Some dogs whose expectations, of being able to interact with or avoid another dog, are not met, might jump up and bark, lunge or pull towards the other dog. They may even redirect this feeling of frustration onto their own lead by grabbing and shaking it, or even their owner by jumping up and mouthing them.

## Seeking professional support



If you're concerned about your dog's behaviour, contact your vet to check your dog is in good health.

Your vet can then refer you to an accredited behaviourist for tailored support. A behaviourist will help to change the way your dog feels, and therefore behaves, around other dogs. For information on sourcing a behaviourist please visit: [dogstrust.org.uk/dog-advice/understanding-your-dog/finding-behaviour-and-training-support](https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/dog-advice/understanding-your-dog/finding-behaviour-and-training-support)

## Supporting your dog

If your dog is behaving in this way around other dogs, there are some steps you can take to help them feel a bit better.

Walk around your local area, without your dog, at various times of day to discover the times and places when you are less likely to encounter other dogs. If possible, create your daily routine around these quieter walking opportunities so that you encounter fewer dogs, and therefore avoid as much as possible the triggers for this distressing behaviour.

Remember, the more your dog practises reacting to other dogs by barking and lunging, the stronger this behaviour is likely to become. Of course, it's unrealistic to imagine you'll never see another dog again, but it will help to reduce the number of dogs they're exposed to while trying to help them feel better and behave differently.

## Spot the signs

As dogs start to become worried about things within their environment, they might initially show very subtle behaviours, such as licking their lips, yawning, or even turning their heads away and blinking. Dogs who are becoming excited - and therefore might feel frustrated if they can't interact with whatever they're excited about - might appear alert with ears pricked forwards, actively seeking out whatever has caught their attention.

If you can predict that your dog is becoming worried or aroused by something, then you can step in straight away to guide them back to calmness. Whatever the reason for their behaviour, your aim is to maintain a calm, enjoyable walk.

Ask a friend to film you walking your dog so that you can watch and learn how they change their body in response to things that are happening around them. Our **Body Language** handout has lots of useful tips to help you understand your dog's communication and spot signs of fear, anxiety, or frustration.



## Keep calm

Set a good example for your dog by staying calm yourself. If your dog is anxious, keeping calm will help them as it shows that you're not worried by anything that might be approaching. If they're frustrated and jumping up or even mouthing you, then remaining calm means you won't risk arousing them further or confusing them about your relationship.

The sooner you can move your dog far enough away that their desire to interact with or avoid the other dog diminishes, the more relaxed they will become.

When dogs behave in this way around other dogs, owners often react themselves by wrapping the lead tightly around their hands. However, this creates tension at the point where the lead attaches to either the dog's collar or harness.

This tension might result in them feeling the collar tighten around their neck, or the harness constrict around their chest, potentially making them panic. There is a risk that your dog might associate this constriction with the approaching dog, which may make matters worse in the long run. So, try to keep the lead loose.

## Manage the situation

When off lead, with plenty of space and freedom to choose how to behave, dogs will often curve in a wide arc right around other unfamiliar dogs, giving each other a wide berth. This is to avoid meeting the other dog directly head on, which can be intimidating for them. However, when dogs are on lead, they cannot perform this natural avoidance behaviour and their options for responding are therefore limited.

Help your dog out by giving oncomers a wide berth, for example by crossing over the road if safe to do so. Try to do this before your dog starts to react to the approaching dog, to help them get out of the habit of simply reacting on sight.

You can also help your dog by simply turning away from an oncoming dog and walking back the way you've just come. The aim is for you to turn them away as soon as you notice a dog approaching and before your dog starts to react. This may be frustrating for you if you're under time pressure, so make sure you plan your walks carefully to avoid other dogs if you're in a rush! Remember to ask your dog to change direction at random times too, so it doesn't become a predictor of other dogs approaching.

There will inevitably be times when you and your dog are taken by surprise and your dog responds by lunging and barking. If this happens don't panic, just keep moving your dog away to a safe distance at which they can relax.

As soon as your dog has relaxed be sure to give them lots of praise. This should be something they really like. It might be a fuss, some food or even a game with a much-loved toy. This gives your dog something to focus on and rewards them for calmly turning away from another dog.

If you have more than one dog, it can be easier and safer to walk them separately.

You may think that stopping so your dog can see the other dog will help them realise they don't need to behave in this way. However, if your dog is already feeling overstimulated this might only add to their distress. Instead, just calmly and quietly keep moving! Lead your dog far enough away from the other dog so that they can start to relax.



## Learning new skills

There may be times when you need to distract your dog so that you can manage the situation for them, and buy yourself a little time. Practise scattering a handful of treats in the home, saying “find it” as you do, so your dog has to put their nose to the ground and sniff them out. After repeating this game a few times, your dog will soon start putting their nose to the ground as soon as they hear you say “find it”.

You can then practise in your garden and in quieter areas outside the house, before trying when there is a dog in the distance. The idea is that you can then use this to distract your dog as another dog approaches. Your dog sniffing about gives a clear sign to other dogs that they’re busy and don’t want to interact, and you’ll have time to decide which way to turn to best avoid those dogs. Your dog will also have an activity to enjoy!

Remember to keep practising this game at home and on quiet walks, even when there are no dogs around. Otherwise, your dog might learn that “find it” means a dog is nearby, and look up for the other dog rather than down for their treats, which will be counter-productive!

Read our **Walking Skills** handout for other useful ideas.

Anxious or fearful dogs might benefit from having their confidence built in other areas of their lives as well, as there may be things besides other dogs that worry them. Our leaflets on **Building Confidence** might be useful. Dogs that are easily frustrated and struggle to control themselves when life becomes exciting might benefit from training that focuses on teaching them to be patient and calm.

## Contacts for further support



We provide lifelong telephone-based behavioural support for all our adopted dogs. If you need help for your Dogs Trust dog please email:

[postadoptionssupport@dogstrust.org.uk](mailto:postadoptionssupport@dogstrust.org.uk)

Your nearest Dog School Team are also happy to help and can be contacted via:

[dogstrustdogschool.org.uk](http://dogstrustdogschool.org.uk)

The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice. If you are worried about your dog, then do consult your vet.