



Help! My Dog Loses it **on Walks**

What's really going on, the concept that changes everything, and 3 things you can start doing today

If you're reading this, you probably know the feeling: you see another dog coming down the sidewalk and your stomach drops. You tighten the leash. You scan for escape routes. You brace yourself for the barking, the lunging, the embarrassment. Maybe you've stopped walking certain routes. Maybe you only go out early in the morning or late at night to avoid other dogs. Maybe you've stopped taking your dog places altogether.

First, let's get two things straight:

You're not a bad owner. The fact that you're reading this guide tells me you care deeply about your dog. That's not the problem.

Your dog isn't a bad dog. They're not aggressive, dominant, or broken. They're struggling with something, and once you understand what it is, everything starts to change.

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON?



When your dog barks and lunges at other dogs, people, bikes, or anything else on walks, most people assume it's aggression. It almost never is.

What it usually is: fear, frustration, or overstimulation. Your dog is reacting because they don't know what else to do. They haven't learned a better way to handle the situation, so their brain goes to the only option it knows — make the scary or exciting thing go away by being big and loud.

Think of it this way: your dog isn't choosing to be reactive. They're overwhelmed and doing the only thing they know how to do in that moment.

The three most common drivers of reactivity:

- **Fear** - "That thing is scary and I need it to go away." Your dog has learned that barking and lunging creates distance from things that make them uncomfortable.
- **Frustration** - "I want to get to that thing and I CAN'T." This is common in dogs who actually want to greet but don't know how to handle the frustration of being on leash.
- **Overstimulation** - "There is WAY too much happening and my brain can't handle it." The environment is just too much. Too many sights, sounds, smells, and movement all at once.

Understanding which one is driving your dog's behavior is the first step. But regardless of the cause, there's one concept that changes everything about how you approach walks.

THE CONCEPT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING:

THRESHOLD

Every dog has an invisible line called their **threshold**. It's the line between "I can think" and "I'm in survival mode."

Below threshold: Your dog can notice a trigger (another dog, a person, a bike) and still think clearly. They can take a treat. They can look at you. They can make choices. This is where learning happens.

Above threshold: Your dog has tipped over the edge. They're barking, lunging, spinning, or shutting down. They can't hear you. They can't take a treat. Their brain has gone into full react mode.

No learning happens here. Zero.

This is why most walks go wrong. By the time you notice your dog reacting, they're already over threshold. You're trying to get through to a dog whose brain has left the building.

The goal isn't to eliminate triggers from your dog's life. It's to **keep your dog below threshold so they can actually learn a better response**. And the #1 tool for that? Distance.

More space between your dog and a trigger = more room to think. Less space = closer to the edge. That's it. Distance is free, and it's the most powerful tool you have right now.



Get really good at watching and reading your dog's body language. Observe how they look when they're happy for a baseline. A closed mouth, a stiff body, or a hard stare means your dog is approaching threshold – that's your cue to create distance before the reaction happens.

3 Things You Can Start Doing Today

1. CREATE DISTANCE – YOUR #1 TOOL

When you see a trigger coming, don't wait for your dog to react. Move. Cross the street. Turn around. Step behind a parked car. Get as much space as you need for your dog to notice the trigger without losing it.

This isn't retreating or "letting your dog win." This is smart training. You're setting your dog up to succeed by keeping them in the zone where their brain is still working.

Here's a great hack: **find a fenced dog park or busy area where your dog can watch other dogs and people from a safe distance.** The fence keeps everything contained. You control the distance. Your dog gets to practice seeing triggers without being in the middle of it. Park 30, 50, even 100 feet away — whatever distance your dog can handle without reacting.

Try this today:

On your next walk, the moment you spot a trigger in the distance — BEFORE your dog reacts — create space. Cross the street, change direction, whatever it takes. Notice how your dog responds when they have enough room to think. That distance? That's your starting point.

3 Things You Can Start Doing Today

2. REWARD THE LOOK, NOT THE LOCK-ON

There's a split second between your dog noticing a trigger and reacting to it. In that moment, they look. Their ears go up. Their body stiffens slightly. They're assessing.

That moment you see the **look** before the **lock-on** is your golden window. If you can mark and reward that moment ("yes!" + high-value treat), you're teaching your dog that noticing a trigger is actually a good thing. Over time, your dog starts to look at a trigger and then look at YOU, expecting the reward.

This only works below threshold. If your dog is already barking and lunging, you've missed the window and you'll need to find a way to increase distance or find a way to block your dog from seeing the trigger. An emergency U turns work nicely. They get your turned in the opposite direction and moving so your dog has a harder time thinking about the trigger and if it's fear based reactivity, they're probably quite a bit relieved to be going the opposite way!

Try this today:

Grab some high-value treats (real chicken, cheese, something your dog goes crazy for). On your next walk, the moment your dog notices a trigger in the distance - the ear perk, the head turn - say "yes!" and give a treat. Do it 3-5 times on one walk. You're building a new association: trigger = good things happen.

3 Things You Can Start Doing Today

3. Set Your Dog Up to Succeed

Stop taking your dog into situations where you already know they're going to fail while in training. If every walk is a meltdown, you're not training, you're just rehearsing the problem. And every time your dog practices reacting, that behavior gets stronger.

Instead: shorten your walks, pick quieter times, and choose routes with fewer triggers. Early morning and late evening are usually calmer. Residential streets with good visibility (so you can spot triggers coming) beat busy sidewalks.

And here's something most people don't think about: replace some of that walk time with play. Most dogs have natural drives – chasing, tugging, hunting – that aren't getting met on a stressful walk anyway. A 10-minute game of tug or chase in your backyard satisfies those needs, burns energy, and builds your relationship without any of the stress. **Your dog doesn't necessarily need a long walk. They need an outlet.**

A short, successful walk where your dog stayed calm plus some play at home is worth 10 times more than a long walk full of reactions. **Quality over quantity.**

Try this today: This week, adjust one thing about your walking routine: the time, the route, or the length. Pick the option that gives your dog the best chance of staying under threshold. Then replace the extra time with a game of tug or chase at home. Even if that means a 10-minute walk around the block at 6 AM and 10 minutes of tug in the yard – that's a win!

THE BIGGER PICTURE

These strategies will help you manage walks right now. But I want to be honest with you: management isn't the same as behavior modification. Managing reactivity means avoiding triggers, crossing the street, and keeping your distance. It's necessary and it's where you start. But the goal isn't to spend the next 10 years crossing the street every time you see another dog.

Real transformation means your dog learns a new way to respond. It means they can see a trigger and choose calm. It means you can walk past another dog without holding your breath. That takes structured, professional support — someone who understands your dog's specific triggers, builds a plan around their needs, and teaches you how to be the handler your dog needs.

That's what we do.

Ready for Real World Obedience?

Our ODYSSEY program is intensive behavior modification for reactive dogs. It includes trainer-handled sessions to build new patterns, skill transfer so you can handle your dog confidently. Plus lifetime support with annual tune-ups — because life changes and your dog's needs might too.

Every ODYSSEY program is backed by our guarantee.



WANT TO GO FURTHER? BOOK A FREE 30-MINUTE CONSULT TO TALK ABOUT WHERE YOUR DOG IS RIGHT NOW AND WHETHER ODYSSEY IS THE RIGHT FIT FOR YOU!
FREE CONSULTATION | (321) 209-0504