

Helping your dog with on-lead angst



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Many people tell me that their dog is fine with other dogs off the lead, but once he's on, he's a monster!

If your dog falls into this category, and barks, lunges or snaps at other dogs when he's on the lead, but is sociable and friendly when he's off the lead, then the tips below may help you. These are designed to be implemented in conjunction with one-to-one guidance and help from a suitably qualified and experienced trainer or behaviourist, so if you are worried about your dog's behaviour, seek help from a professional as soon as possible.

Why is he behaving like this?

The reasons why your dog might be grumpy with other dogs on lead, but not off, are many. The most common are because:

1. He cannot get away from the other dog (as he's restricted on the lead) and feels a bit trapped by the situation.
2. Humans are not very good at 'reading' when dogs are uncomfortable with each other – and may get too close to another dog who is really saying 'keep away'.
3. The dog has learned that the approach of another dog while he's on lead is a bad thing, and so barks and lunges to keep them away. This is a kind of 'get in first' strategy which tends to work well, because then the other dog does keep away.
4. The dog is really guarding you as a resource. After all, you are the best thing in his whole world. This might be exacerbated if you are also carrying his toy and treats. If you have another dog (or dogs), he may also be resource guarding them too.



So, what can you do?

1. Do not allow your dog to practise aggression strategies on walks

This is primarily because when you practise something, you get better at it!

Bear in mind that every time your dog has an altercation with another dog, even from a distance, he is practising the behaviour. He's also being rewarded for the behaviour because the other dog will inevitably move away or will be moved away. So, use tip number 3 to help you do this.



2. Do not allow your dog to practise aggression strategies at other times

Here's something that not many people think about. Every time your dog has an emotional response to another dog, and reacts in the same or similar way that he would when on a walk, he is practising the behaviour. This means if he barks or becomes excited when he hears dogs on TV, dogs outside the house on the path, dogs he sees from the car window, and even imaginary dogs that he thinks he hears at any other time...

Watch out for these 'practise sessions' and think about how you might be able to prevent them from triggering your dog via prevention, rather than cure.



3. Teach your dog a 'let's get out of here' behaviour – and then practise it until it's automatic

The simplest 'let's get out of here' behaviour is a sudden turn on your heel, so you can walk off in the opposite direction at the first hint of trouble. However, you must teach your dog this as a training exercise well away from any 'crisis' situation, so that as soon as you give the cue – such as "Let's Go!" he will turn with you – without any need for tension on the lead or tugging on the collar, which can all exacerbate the situation. You then need to practise this exercise until it's as automatic as tying your shoe laces.



4. Think about whether your dog may actually be 'resource defending' when another dog approaches and he or she is on the lead. This is often over-looked but is a prime motivator for wanting another dog to move away – after all you are your dog's most precious resource and being 'tied' to you by a short lead will only intensify his feelings of possession if he's that way inclined.

If you think that this may be the case, then asking someone else to help by walking with would be ideal. Then, anytime that your dog looks like he's even thinking about being defensive, you immediately pass the lead to the other person, and walk off. In other words, your dog's behaviour causes you to leave him – albeit for just a few seconds. The other person can then praise and reward your dog for a new behaviour – such as looking at them or walking past with no fuss, and then you can return – which is also a reward. Most people need the help of an experienced trainer with this process.

5. Simulate being off the lead, even if the dog has to be on the lead. How can you do this? Well, a long line – or, and this might surprise you – a flexi lead can work well. Suddenly giving the dog unexpected space the instant you see another dog – rather than meeting his expectation of having less space as the lead tightens can really influence his mind set. However, you must have surety that your dog won't react badly and frighten or injure the other dog if he meets it – so this is only for dogs who are 100% good with other dogs when off lead, and should only be considered with the help of an experienced trainer to guide you.

6. Teach a brilliant incompatible behaviour. Why? Well, put simply, if your dog is carrying a ball in his mouth then he's not thinking about the other dog, nor is he able to use his mouth for any other purpose in that moment. The incompatible behaviour needs to be taught AWAY from the crisis situation - only building up to using it in the 'crisis' situation gradually. Again, some practical help from a positive trainer is very useful here.

Finally, punishment of any kind (shouting, jerking the lead, smacking, scolding, throwing things at the dog etc) will all make your dog's behaviour WORSE. This is because nearly all on-lead aggression is fuelled by the dog's belief that other dogs coming close in this situation are a threat. Increasing your dog's worry about what happens when they are near and he's on the lead will only make him more determined to move them away!

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