



Low Stress Handling

Many dogs are uncomfortable with specific kinds of handling or handling in specific situations. This might be due to multiple experiences where the dog asked for the handling to stop but it continued – likely for their own safety or with good intentions in mind. It may also be because your dog is excitable and finds that restraint is uncomfortable and frustrating. Both causes can be worked through.

Our dogs ask for us to slow down or stop quite often. They use body language and often ask quietly, in a way that we don't understand. However, we can work to better understand our dogs and to more clearly communicate so that they can understand us. Regardless of why our dogs are uncomfortable – they're telling us that they are. We'll give you the short list of what behaviors you should stop and adjust for. Calming signals should be considered **yellow lights**; our dog is stating their discomfort and asking us to adjust. Cut off signals should be considered **red lights**; our dogs are saying, "Stop now or I may need to defend myself". These are warning behaviors meant to cause you to pause.

Red light behaviors – also known as **cut off cues** will typically look like:

- Freezing: showing a sudden stop in movement
- Closing mouth: similar to a freeze, this would be a dog who was panting and suddenly stops and holds its mouth closed
- Growling: likely heard when the dog is also freezing and holding its mouth closed

Yellow light behaviors – also known as **calming signals**. There are many, but your most common will typically look like:

- Lip Licking: not in the presence of food
- Yawning: not in the context of naptime
- Paw Lift: often accompanied by sitting, yawning, looking away and lip licking

Setting Up for Success

We can help our dogs by adjusting our approach to medication, medical exams, grooming and our day to day behaviors, like how we lift them into a car or dressing them in a harness. Some of our pets prefer not to be leaned over, we can avoid this by asking them to jump up onto a bench or chair so that we can adjust their experience. We can also help by communicating with our veterinary professionals. Giving them the heads up that your dog doesn't enjoy restraint may help them to better prepare for your dog by adjusting the tools they use. You may need to make sure to work with a veterinarian that allows you to be in the room for treatment. You may also need to bring your own supplies to help your pup get through things. If you know your pup loves a special treat paste, don't be afraid to bring it with you!

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Many veterinary professionals and groomers are continuing their education and making changes to how they work with our pets by taking the Fear Free Challenge. These professionals are working to lower the stress in their clinics by changing their handling and treatment methods and even their office environments. You can search for facilities and individual professionals in your area by searching www.fearfreehappyhomes.com. The Fear Free Happy Homes campaign was developed by veterinary behaviorists and is an amazing educational platform that provides free information to owners looking to learn more about how to help their pets.

Changing Expectations by Changing Experiences

Part of your plan to move forward is to help your pet change their emotional response to things they previously feared. For instance, if your pet is not a fan of restraint, you can work to make restraint a fun or neutral experience by changing the circumstances. This won't happen overnight but we can work to create a new learned history to replace their old one. As they're new to you, this is the perfect time to build that new, rock-solid relationship.

First, it's important to break things down. For some of us, just the idea of running a marathon is overwhelming. If instead, we were asked to run around the block, we would probably be more willing! It's also extremely hard to focus and learn when we are stressed. One of the most important factors of changing an emotional response is by making sure to practice in pieces that keep your pet under their stress threshold. Each activity can be broken down into smaller more bite-size pieces that allow for us to more readily change our dog's experience.

Some stress signs to look for and be sure to pause and adjust are: heavy panting, pacing, avoidance, mouthing behaviors, barking at you or the item, and lowered interest in food. Be sure to reference the above yellow and red light behaviors and get a pro on board if you're seeing any of those.

Bribing and luring will always backfire. We can rely on it from time to time, but it won't work for long. Good things that always come before scary things – become scary themselves. It's really important that while you're training to change your dog's perception you're presenting the thing that they find scary or concerning before the food/good thing is presented. The previously scary thing should predict good things! Good things aren't completely limited to food either, for a stressed dog, taking a break or moving away from the scary thing can also be a reward. Be sure to keep your sessions short and let your dog set the pace!

Using a **marker** will help your dog connect their actions to the treats. This means using a word or sound that indicates food/reward is coming. Most commonly used are a clicker or the word "yes". The sound of the click or "yes" will mark for your dog that that they got the right answer and the reward is coming. This helps clean up our timing so that the treat is coming for the behavior that was marked, not for them scratching their ear ten seconds later. This means that your dog will do the behavior we want, then hear the "yes" or click and then get the reward.

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Here's a training example to get your started:

Your dog is afraid of having their harness put on:

1. Pick up the harness, cue “yes,” give them a treat, and put harness down. Do this until your dog begins to wag their tail when the harness is picked up.
2. Pick up the harness, move it towards your dog, cue “yes” when they look towards it, and proceed as before.
3. Repeat the offering of the harness but this time feed for movement towards the harness.
4. You'll continue reinforcing for putting their head into the harness, give the treat, and remove the harness.

Be sure to keep your sessions short and sweet and watch how your dog is responding to training. It's important that when the harness is present, the treats are flowing, but when it is put away, the food stops. We really want our dog to understand that the harness (for this example) predicts the good things!

Here are some more resources to help you and your pet get off on handling the right foot:

Fear Free Happy Homes – www.fearfreehappyhomes.com

“Cooperative Care: 7 Steps to Stress-Free Husbandry” by Deborah A. Jones, Ph.D

“Doggie Language” by Lili Chin and *“On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals”* by Turrid Ruggas

Dr. Chirag Patel's handling training protocol: *The Bucket Game* – www.facebook.com/thebucketgame

YouTube: [Freeport Veterinary Hospital](#)

YouTube: [Synergy Behavior Solutions](#)

YouTube: [Atta Pup!](#)

YouTube: [Kikopup](#)

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