

Trigger stacking: how we set our dogs up to fail

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Trigger Stacking

Why those first days at home can be hell
for a dog
&
How they can lead to fearful behaviour



When we adopt a dog, what we expect is for them to be happy. We like to think that they get what's happening and that it's all blooming marvellous. We tell ourselves that they know what's going on and that they're going to love it.

When I adopted Amigo, what I told myself was that he was thinking:

Lady, you are the best person I ever met. I'm going to be such a good boy! We are going to have the most amazing adventures together! I'm just going to lick you and lick you and lick you. Thank you! Thank you so much. See my waggy tail? That's how happy I am!

What we don't think is that really, they're most likely thinking:

Who the hell is this woman? She seems very nice. I wish she'd stop looking at me. Please don't touch me. Don't touch me... Don't touch me. I don't even know you!!! She's touching me. I don't like hands. Hands hurt. Why is she touching me? Where are we going? What's going on? What's this tiny thing? What's that noise? What's she doing? Where does she want me to sit? It sure smells funny in here. What the f@&'s that noise? Why is the seat moving? OH MY GOD this thing is moving!!!! I want to get out. Can I get out. How do I get out? Where is the door? How can I get out? Stop touching me! Stop looking at me!*

Not only did I pop him in the car, I took him to a new house. I introduced him to new animals. I set him up to be stressed and without really considering it (he was the fifth dog I'd adopted) I didn't think about the stress he was feeling. It took

five months to wrestle him back to a place of calm. Sorry Meegie. I wish I could start again. Luckily, he forgave me for this and I hope he feels safe now.

The modern world is stressful to a dog. They are living in a world that does not always make sense to them. It's akin to moving to a different country with a different language and very different customs. Notch that discomfort up a little and you get a sense of what it must be like to live in a dog's world. If your dog has ever barked at anything new, you may have laughed it off, because we simply don't know what will freak our dogs out. Tilly spent a good five minutes barking at the washing basket in the garden yesterday. I don't know why. She's seen it before. It's been in the garden before. Nothing was different in most ways than every other time the laundry basket has been in the garden. But yesterday it spooked her. Heston once spent a good while barking at a sieve. A stone cross also freaked him out. Amigo doesn't like to be inside during storms. Molly used to bark at snowmen. It's common for dogs to bark at hoovers, lawnmowers and other animals. These are fearful responses to things that don't make sense to dogs.

But barking is not the only way that we can see an animal is stressed.

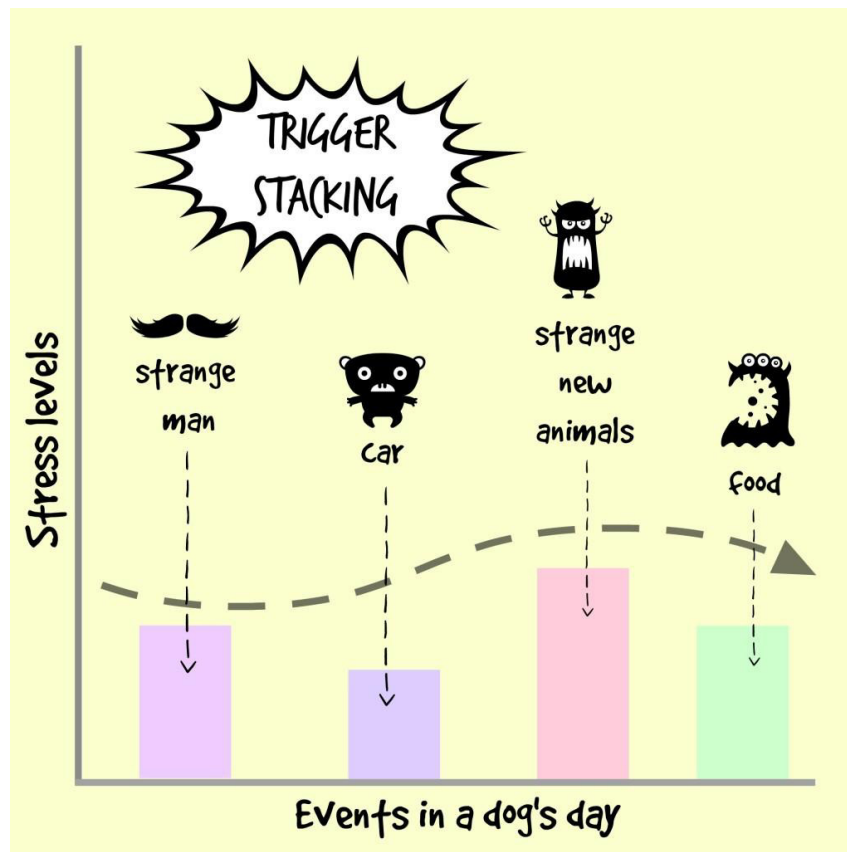
Creatures feel fear and have a stress response. This we know. When something makes us feel afraid, our bodies have surprisingly similar responses as a dog's. Adrenaline is produced. Our heart rate increases. Our brains become less capable of making choices as our fight-or-flight response kicks in. Once the brain says, "hey I don't like this!" the thalamus gives us a shot of hormones that set us off on a very typical "stress pathway". Ever tried to reason with someone who's red in the face? Ever tried to get your dog back under control when they're barking at a stranger? You'll know how hard it is to overcome the stress response.

What normally happens in a dog's day is that they meet a series of stress-inducing triggers. If you've socialised them and introduced them to these triggers when they are young, they will most probably learn that these things are nothing to be afraid of. If you don't, you've got an uphill battle to show them that a strange man in a hat is nothing to be afraid of. When we adopt an adult dog, we have no idea what they have been socialised with and what is a trigger.

For the most part, our dogs meet an unfamiliar trigger and then they move on. They may growl, show their teeth, snap or bark at it as they attempt to "fight" the trigger, or they may run away to a safe distance and hide if they are in "flight" mode. The other week, someone dropped a sack of fertiliser by the side of the field. Heston did both of these things: he stood, he stared, his hackles went up, he growled. The thing didn't move. He went a little closer and growled more in case it hadn't heard him. Then he barked at it. It didn't care. He went closer, barked and then backed off. He did this progressively, getting gradually closer until he'd decided that it was nothing to be scared of, barking, retreating, barking, retreating.

When we start down the stress response pathway, adrenaline is produced to help us run or fight. Cortisol is also produced. This is important and we'll come back to it later. Normal responses to stress include avoidance (not looking at it, backing off, seeking shelter) defense aggression (growling, snapping, barking) looking for contact with humans or other animals for reassurance (hiding between your legs, often!) seeking attention from a bonded human or animal. When dogs can't escape or attack, you will see **other behaviours** too. Lip-licking, flat ears, tense faces, panting, low body posture, seeking escape, slow movements. They'll be reluctant to take a treat (which has implications for positive training and counter conditioning to overcome the response)

Normally, the trigger goes away and the situation returns to normal. The body stops making stress hormones and within 70-110 minutes, most of those hormones have dissipated. The dog learns to tolerate these small events and episodes. Cats in the garden, postal workers, teams of cyclists going past... they're strange and unfamiliar events and your dog will have periods between them to recover.



But what we do with a shelter dog is take an unfamiliar dog and give it a short, sharp shock of everything we know to be stressful. We take a dog who is already stressed. Even two weeks in the shelter is enough to have long-lasting consequences on the stress hormones and body, especially if they have been kept on their own.

Shelters are good at recognising unnatural stress responses for dogs, but there aren't often solutions to this. Displacement activities may be evident (licking, grooming and eating stuff they shouldn't) as well as stereotypical responses such as circling, excessive grooming, tail chasing, tail biting, excessive drinking, fence-line running, anorexia or excessive eating (yes, dogs comfort-eat too) and dogs may even hallucinate, chasing imaginary flies or staring into space.

But there are many dogs who do not exhibit such behaviours in kennel environments, and we may be unaware that they are very close to the point at which they cannot control their responses or when it all becomes too much for them. We call this point the "threshold" and it's marked in red on the diagram below.

When we take a dog and subject it to a range of new and stressful experiences, we stack those triggers all together, and we are not allowing their bodies to deal with the triggers we are subjecting them to. In one short hour, everything changes. They go from an austere environment where the majority of dogs show some signs of stress, and we think that what we are doing is comforting and reassuring. It isn't. We introduce them to new people. We may put them in a car, which they may never have experienced except for a brief trip to the pound or their journey to the refuge. We take everything in their world and turn it upside down.

And instead of being able to tolerate the stress, we don't allow sufficient time between all of the changes, and we stack the triggers so that they build up, one on top of another.