



Overexcited Dog? How to Calm a Dog Down



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One of our small dogs tends to get excited — very excited — when it's time for a walk, or dinner, or play, or pretty much anything that looks like it could be fun. She spends a lot of time in a state of eager anticipation — “Oh boy, what are we going to do now?!” If we've been quiet for a while, and then get up to do something, she does a happy dance. While it's easy to assume a dog's exuberance means they're happy, the opposite may be true: Overexcited dogs may be stressed and anxious, which can lead to behavioral issues. Here's why dogs get overexcited, plus some tips for how to calm them down.

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It is important to be patient and consistent when trying to calm an overexcited dog. With time and patience, you can help your dog learn how to relax and control their excitement. To calm an overexcited dog, create a calm environment, distract them, teach them a calming cue, massage them, speak in a calm voice, take them for a walk, or give them a break.

Why dogs get overexcited

Anticipating something fires up the seeking circuit in the brain, which releases pleasurable chemicals, such as dopamine. When a dog hunts, for example, that circuit is activated. The dog enjoys the act of hunting, which would be excellent in the natural world, where hunting would be necessary for survival. If a dog didn't want to hunt, they probably wouldn't survive long. When you think about it, hunting is the ultimate anticipatory act.

People who train their dogs for sports often use the combination of eager anticipation and excitement for their own ends — retrieving, nosework, agility, dock-diving. It can, however, cause problems both in and outside the home if your dog gets overly excited or aroused when you don't want them to.

This energy system is also activated when a dog is alarmed. At the sound of an unknown noise or unexpected sight, epinephrine (adrenaline) is released, preparing the body for action — either fight or flight. The heart rate increases, and blood is sent to the muscles needed for rapid movement and away from the surface of the skin.

So, if the dog needs to fight, they won't feel much pain until after the fight is over. If the dog needs to flee, they can go much faster and much farther than they would if they weren't pumped up with chemicals. Epinephrine is very good for animals in the wild, where an action not taken can end in death; however, it's not always useful in our world. And it can take a long time for the dog to calm down after going into arousal (days even, for some dogs).

How overexcitement can cause chaos

One of the problems with arousal is that it appears to be addictive. When a dog sees another dog and goes into a state of excitement (whining, pulling on the leash, sometimes barking), they might be anxious and alarmed — or they might be enjoying the dopamine rush. Sometimes, the dog might start out being frightened, but over time, they lose their fear and just go into eager anticipation, particularly when they can predict certain situations.

Some dogs might eagerly anticipate the house on the block where they know a dog will be barking behind a fence. They'll pull their human all the way there, and then bark and lunge at the fence. Often, they'll bark at the fence, whether the other dog is there or not. These dogs are addicted to the high. You could probably offer them whole steaks, and they wouldn't eat them — until they've finished barking.

Many dogs will sit at a window or in their yard and just wait, anticipating that a bird might sit on a tree, or a squirrel may run along a fence. When that happens, their barking can be startling and, well, extremely annoying. If you tell your dog to stop, it generally won't work. If you call your dog back and reward the recall, the barking will cease, but now you feel like you're rewarding barking. If you don't do anything, the behavior will generally get worse. Most dogs don't get used to the squirrels and stop responding to them because it feels so good to bark.

Think of arousal as a red cloud of energy that interferes with your dog's judgment and causes this undesired behavior. Sometimes, arousal manifests as uncontrolled excitement, sometimes with a target (another dog, perhaps) or sometimes not (puppy rushes or "zoomies"). Sometimes, it is sustained anticipation. No matter what, there doesn't seem to be a lot of conscious thought going on while a dog is in that state, probably because the chemicals activated in their brains have little to do with thinking.

Arousal can lead to aggression toward other dogs, pets, or people and even major destruction. Many dog attacks are caused by arousal, often in conjunction with their predatory drive, which can also cause dogs to get out of control.

Although it's probably not intentional, if you're gone for eight to 10 hours, it's likely that you're coming home to a bored and lonely dog. Your entrance might cause them to go into paroxysms of delight, racing around, picking up toys or balls, and/or leaping up on you. If, right after that, you take your dog out for exercise, you may compound that excitement.

How to calm an overexcited dog

Some dogs are naturally calmer than others, but you can help easily aroused dogs learn to inhibit their excitement and learn that other emotional states are a good thing. You can do this by analyzing when your dog gets excited or anxious and actively working to remove the stimulation or counteract it. Here are other tips for how to calm an overexcited dog:

1. Teach the dog a calming cue.

In terms of training, obedience — sit, come, down, stay, polite walking — is always valuable, particularly if you practice on a daily basis, first in calm areas, and then in areas that might ordinarily excite your dog.

2. Train their nose.

Teaching your dog to use their nose is also an excellent way to increase their focus and decrease excitability. Just tossing a bunch of kibble in the yard and then letting them search for it will help. At first, your dog will run madly around the yard, but as their instincts are honed, they'll be able to show more concentration. Your dog's nose is their primary sense — may as well use it.

3. Interrupt playtime.

Interrupt your dog frequently during play — call them to you, have them sit, and then let them return to play. After their play session, make sure they relax before you start a new activity. If you take a dog out right after they've played enthusiastically, they're likely to be ready for more action!

4. Stay calm yourself.

Dogs can get overly aroused when you come home and greet them, so calm, matter-of-fact greetings — or no greetings at all — might help them calm down. And dogs can get extremely aroused when they think a walk is in the picture. Mixing up cues helps calm these dogs — picking up the leash and then putting it back down again, doing the same with keys, or reading the newspaper until the dog settles — are all ways to teach your dog that you're not going anywhere until the energy is right. Dogs get very excited around meal times, so varying the time you serve meals will help them control their anticipation.

5. Practice relaxation.

You can also show dogs how to relax and help them learn to enjoy it. Having your dog lie down and then gently petting them will make reinforce relaxation. It can also be helpful to have them sit quietly while watching others.

6. Reinforce with treats.

One of the most useful techniques for Strider, a German Shepherd with leash reactivity, was having him lie down on his rug close to people playing dog sports, like fly-ball and agility, both of which tend to be very active and noisy. At first, he got reinforced every few

seconds with a treat on the ground (where he had to look for it). After he learned to relax, we didn't need to use the food reinforcement — just lying on his rug became enjoyable.

The bottom line: Be prepared

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, our dogs go into an overly excitable mode. When they're like this, pretty much anything can take them over the top, whether it's a buzzard flying overhead, a dog walking half a block away, or a jogger coming up from behind. Instant relaxation is obviously not possible, so what do you do?

First, it's a good idea to prepare mentally for situations such as these. Ask yourself what you would do if a bicycle suddenly turned a corner ahead of you and zoomed past. Or if another excitable dog started barking at your dog. Often, just practicing a smooth move over and over again will take a lot of the impact away. Pulling a u-turn or moving to the side of the road can be effective. If your dog is already excited, then following the u-turn with some jogging might help move the energy in the direction you'd like. Remember, your dog doesn't know they're doing something "wrong" — they're just responding to stimulation in their environment.

References

- Training a High-Energy Dog to Calm Down
- Breed Differences in Social Cognition, Inhibitory Control, and Spatial Problem-Solving Ability in the Domestic Dog
- A Survey Of The Behaviour Of UK Household Dogs
- Excitement and Aggression
- The Impact of Patience in Dog Training and Rehabilitation

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FAQs

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1. Are there calming products or tools available?

There are many products that can potentially help your dog calm down, ranging from lick mats to pheromone products to prescription medication.

2. What role does my behavior play in my dog's excitement level?

Dog owners can inadvertantly increase their dog's excitement level — it's important to stay calm and keep your tone of voice neutral, especially when greeting your dog.

3. Is patience important in dealing with an overexcited dog?

Yes, patience is essential — when you're patient with an overexcited dog, it will make you less reactive so you're better able to respond to them calmly.

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