

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Arousal

What is arousal anyway?

By definition, arousal is “a physiological and psychological state of being awake or reactive to stimuli [...] leading to increased heart rate and blood pressure and a condition of sensory alertness, mobility and readiness to respond”

Basically, arousal means that your dog is experiencing a heightened emotional and/or physical state and may seem more alert, more focused, more intense, and/or more active than they normally are. They will likely be more impulsive in this state.

Think of how much better your dog’s emotional state (and yours!) would be if your dog knew how to better and more appropriately control their impulses. There are different types of events and situations that may trigger arousal in dogs. The presence of other dogs on walks, traffic noise, rough play, SQUIRRELS! (just to name a few.) Arousal often affects the dog’s ability to think clearly and function cognitively, oftentimes resulting in unwanted behavior.

Look for the signs:

- Fast heart rate/respiration rate
- Poor impulse control
- Dilated pupils
- Incessant barking
- Spinning and/or pacing
- Tension

Identify triggers: You can’t start working with your pup until you determine what it is that is causing them to become aroused in the first place.

Desensitize and counter-condition: Desensitization is a powerful technique. This can help your pup learn that they can control their impulses and lower their arousal. The first thing you will want to do is present the triggers that are causing the arousal in a less intense way. *Make sure it is comfortable enough that your dog does not react.* For example, if joggers running past is arousing your dog, keep your dog at a distance to where they can see the jogger but not react. During this time you will want to begin to counter- condition, rewarding the dog for calm behavior (sitting, staying, and focusing) – if at any point your dog does react towards the stimuli (in this case, the joggers), move further away from the trigger. With counter-conditioning, you can change your dog’s emotional response and associations they have when a trigger is present. When working on these exercises, make sure you bring something yummy that will entice your dog and keep them focused on learning (hot dogs, cheese, deli meats). You are teaching your pup that calm behaviors gain rewards and compulsive behavior makes the rewards go away. You are also changing the association the dog has when a trigger is present to a positive one.

Manage to prevent rehearsal: Knowing what to do and how to do it is one thing but maintaining it can be another and this is often considered the "hard" part as it does require management, consistency and good timing. Your dog's behavior will not change overnight. Keep in mind, your dog does not want to feel this way and while it can be frustrating at times, you two are a team! Keep calm and be kind, you are sure to see results.

In severe and extreme cases, arousal can lead to aggressive behaviors. We often talk of the "tipping point" as the switch to where aggression begins; for example, a dog who becomes aroused at the sight of another dog turns and bites the owner. This redirection (displaced aggression) is coming from a place of arousal – and escalating to a bite means that the dog was far over their threshold. There are many instances in which this can occur and because of the intensity and severity at times, you want to make sure you are managing your environment and managing your pet – that way everyone is safe.

What not to do!

We caution against the use of aversive tools or trainers who describe themselves as aversive, balanced, or mixed-method. Aversive tools include things like shock collars, prong collars, and choke chains – tools that teach through fear, pain, and intimidation. Aversive techniques do not change a dog's emotional response to stimuli; rather, they shut down behaviors. These approaches also often punish the warning so escalation becomes "sudden" and more severe. Shock collars (sometimes describes as "vibration" collars) are sometimes thought of as quick-fixes but they create long-term damage by teaching avoidance and immobility, also known as learned helplessness.

If you need more help:

Seek out a consultation with a professional, certified behaviorist or a certified dog trainer.

Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: <http://www.ccpdt.org>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org>