

Behavioral Downs (BD) *VIDEO*

Behavioral downs (BD) are intentional relaxation. They're important for putting relaxation on cue and are like meditation for your dogs mind. BD's teach your dog to focus on and choose relaxation over frustration. BD's are key to teaching the anxious dog to relax because it teaches them how to learn to let go of energy and relax anytime they feel frustrated. Dogs will instead of getting energetic work through it's own stress to find relaxation and eventually find relaxation rewarding.

Behavioral downs are NOT a stress free way of learning, arguably nothing is. It is actually an important part of the learning psychology of the BD that the dog goes through some stress. The purpose of the BD is to teach the dog how to calm themselves down when they are under stress (whether eustress or distress) and how to let go of unproductive energy. That said the dog should initially be taught the process at the easiest time in the easiest place for the dog. If the dog seems to just lay down and relax without any challenge then that situation is too easy, the dog is not actually learning anything relating to the purpose of the BD. Nothing bad about that and good that you started in a very easy situation, now move to a time or place that will be just slightly more challenging to the dog.

While doing this exercise may be quite difficult for the dog and the human in the very beginning it is absolutely life changing for both. Within a few weeks, if not days, the dog will start to spontaneously relax at times that it previously would not have and will generally be able to deal with training (of any kind) better.

BD's are not suitable for when you try to overcome reactivity or aggression. It is a great adjunct to other training. Behavioral Downs are not used to deal with transient situations such as the arrival of guests.

How to Conduct a Behavioral Down

Step 1 Prep:

For your first behavioral down start in a quiet place where your dog is comfortable.

Make sure you and your dog have gone to the bathroom and make sure you have your phone, or a book, and a drink with you so you do not need to move for the required time.

This is a silent exercise. Do not interact with your dog in any way! Dogs do not attack trees :)

Have your dog with you on a flat leash and a secure flat collar (no prongs, chokes or starmark collars)

Step 2 Begin:

Stand with the leash under the ball of your foot and the leash handle in one hand.

The dog should have just enough leash to stand comfortably when at your side, but not enough to jump on you or pace around.

There is NEVER downward pressure on the leash or a verbal cue to lay down or sit.

The length of the leash from the handler's foot should be the shortest length possible that should allow for slack in the leash if the dog stands immediately beside the handler's leg but no more slack than that.

Handler must completely ignore dog's behavior through the entire process including not engaging the dog physically, visually, or verbally unless they are jumping or chewing the leash (you can then use a verbal correction or squirt your dog with a squirt bottle with 1/2 vinegar 1/2 water solution).

Step 3 the First Cycle:

We are looking for our dog to reach target behavior. Target behavior is complete relaxation which is identified by the dog not only being down but in complete contact with the ground; its muscles and breathing being in a relaxed state; and, visually disengaged from the environment (no moving eye brows or eyes). They should be so relaxed that if you called their name they would slowly get up like from a nap and not spring up.

When the target behavior is reached, that constitutes one Cycle.

Step 4 the Second Cycle:

The second cycle begins spontaneously when the dog becomes not relaxed anymore, most commonly by getting up and moving around but the dog could still be laying down but not as relaxed as target behavior.

Step 5 End Behavioral Down:

Handler should always get two (2) complete Cycles before releasing the dog.

Release must be non-energetic and not involve any motion on the part of the handler. Bend over, say your dogs name and pet them to release them. You can then unclip them or step off the leash.

Moving up the Grade School Model with BD's

As the dog shows it can reasonably easily relax in one situation/time just take another step up. Work in different areas of the house, have them face different walls, do it at different parts of the day. Get them excited about an activity or event like throwing a ball or kibble and then start your BD. Eventually the dog should be able to relax in situations such as outside on a deck, at a sidewalk cafe....whatever you're willing to put in the time and effort to help the dog learn. The dog will likely, and should be expected to, need other training in parallel to the BD to be successful in all situations. After the first two or three weeks it will not always be necessary to get two cycles, it's primarily important to prevent the dog from learning to act like it's relaxed (faking) to trigger a release. The dogs also learn much more deeply by doing the two cycles in the beginning than they will from doing just one.

Additional Tips

- If the leash becomes tight while the dog is laying down, perhaps because the dog rolled on its side or laid into the leash when going down, the handler should discreetly lift their foot to release any tension in the leash. The dog must not feel leash tension while laying down.
- Behavioral Downs must be started when the trainer has a completely open time window since the two cycles must be completed and there's no way to predict the time needed.
- Jack-in-the-box behavior is a normal part of the process.
- As your dog gets better you can do it in front of a chair.
- The first time or several times the dog does two cycles of a BD could be VERY time consuming (30-90 minutes +). For a dog who has great difficulty letting go of energy and calming down it could take over an hour to do two cycles, getting target behavior twice. Do not give up, this will improve quickly AND there is a direct relationship between how long the dog takes to reach target behavior and how much they both need and will benefit from learning from this exercise.
- When your dog can complete two cycles within 30 minutes, it is time to increase the difficulty by adding stimulation to the environment. Maybe you move to a different room in the house or add another family member or pet to the room. Increasing the challenges in the environment helps your dog learn that he CAN relax, even when life gets exciting.
- Watch and see how quickly your dog can reach target behavior, how long they stay in TB and lastly how resistant they are to stimuli. As they progress in all 3 areas make these areas more challenging.
- Never do a BD in an area your dog will not take food in because they're too stressed.
- You can place a bed under your dog for more comfort or practice on carpeted areas at first.

Training Plan

Practice at least twice a day. More for really anxious dogs.

Teaching your dog to relax when someone leaves the room

Step 1

Start BD with guests in the room. When dog reaches target behavior have the chosen person leave the room (often times dogs will think when people move, leave the room or approach the room they must get up as well).

Step 2

Wait for dog to reach TB again.

Step 3

Have person come back into the room. If dog gets up have person leave the room or freeze.

Step 4

The person can come back into the room once the dog reaches TB. Once they do the person can come back in regardless if dog gets out of TB or not.

Step 5

Finish exercise when dog is in TB. When you release, don't move, just pet the dog. The movement during the release is not the predictor of release. Following these steps will teach your dog that relaxing is what brings the person back into the room creating more relaxation in your dog during times when people are moving around your house.