

Stressed Dog? How Trigger Stacking Might Be Putting Your Dog Over Threshold

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Have you ever found yourself saying the words “suddenly and without warning my dog just bit or just went berserko or just wouldn't do what I asked.” If you've ever found yourself saying that, then you might be seeing something called trigger stacking in your dog. Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog.

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Trigger stacking is what Shrek might refer to as getting on my last nerve. Its where small things add up to become a big thing. It's like when your partner asks you to put away your phone at the kitchen table and you go all spider monkey on them, because of all the things that happen in the day. It's like the straw that broke the camel's back. And think about it, like it's a piece of straw, it's like weightless. How could it break a camel's back? Well, it can, if there's like a katrillion, bajillion pieces of straw. Eventually there is an amount of straw that would break a camel's back. I don't know what that amount is really, but you get what I'm saying.

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It's an accumulation of stress that has happened to your dog that day. It's trigger stacking. Triggers being stressors that your dog has experienced, and not all triggers are the same. For example, one trigger may have more intensity than another trigger based on the size, the volume, the distance, whatever it appears to be for that dog. Now dogs of different ages will have different thresholds to different stressors.

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So, a threshold is the place where your dog goes all spider monkey or gets stressed out to the point that they can't function. So, for example, let's say you just get your hair done. You're coming out of the salon and it's pouring rain, but you don't have anything to put on your hair. And so, you just kind of put your hands over your hair and you run out to the car and then you get to the car, and you realize you don't have your keys and your phone is locked in the car.

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So, you're stressed a little bit. There's rain, on top of that your keys are locked in the car and now you can't phone on anyone. So, when eventually you get the auto club there and they opened the car and you get in there and you're about to go home, you check your messages and you find out, hey, got surprised, you've lost your job.

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And so now you're on your way home and you get pulled over for speeding. And man, oh man, do you unload a big whack of emotion on the unsuspecting police officer, right? Because all those stressors create a break in the dam. So, trigger stacking in a dog is exactly the same, except it's expressed way differently. Take for example my puppy This!, I've [shared here](#) on Shaped by Dog that she has had a fear to other dogs. Now we've really made huge inroads and she actually likes other dogs. But I'm sure her stress seeing other dogs in certain situations could go up.



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So, if I just arbitrarily said if we were out walking and another dog came by and the other dog had a soft eye and a low tail wag, and then looked at This! and averted her eyes and kept walking, that would probably be a zero of stress to This!. She wouldn't even register. And she might even wag her tail back. Like, "Hey, I'd like to meet you too, but not really." Right.

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Now let's say there's a dog in the distance, way in the distance that she sees and the dog kind of turns her head towards her and gets all stiff and kind of stares at This! a little bit. And then turns away and keeps walking perpendicular to us, we don't really cross our paths. Now that might be like a 10. She might get a little bit alerted, "What's going on here? That dog's looking at us. It's getting stiff. Oh, what's going on? Okay. That's, that's fine." Dog was a long way away. It wasn't really hugely intense, and the dog left. So probably let's give that a score of 10.

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Now let's have a dog at a distance, gets stiff, looks at us and then starts kind of walking towards us. That might be a score of 50. Now at 50, she might be getting close to her threshold. And then if that same dog running towards her and barking, well let's call that 100 and you know, the dog may have nothing bad in mind, but just that that event may cause her to go over threshold.

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So that is a single event. We might've had a great old day up to that point, but that one event might've put her over threshold. And here's what happens is, the dog gets dumped with adrenaline because adrenaline is telling the dog, 'You better stay aware, something bad might happen'. And then that adrenaline triggers the stress hormone cortisol, and the intensity of the event causes a big dump of cortisol in her system and guess what, cortisol takes an hour on average.

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I mean it's not the same for all dogs but on average the half-life of cortisol is an hour, which means an hour after the event, half those stress levels could still be there in the dog. So, if they get uncomfortable at a stress level - arbitrary numbers again - of say 50 and she just experienced a stress level of 100, then an hour later she still going to be very, very close to being over threshold.

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Okay. So now let's see how our dogs exhibit stress in their bodies. We're going to go back to [episode number 4](#) here on Shaped by Dog, TEMP. So, tail, first of all a dog with a curious tail. It might go up as they're trying to decide, "Is this dangerous? Should I be afraid?" If they're trying to posture and say, "I'm really big and you better stay away." it might, the tail might get stiff.

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If they're worried, the tail might immediately go along between their legs and right along their belly. If they're not as afraid but they're cautious, you might get a low tail wag between the hocks. And if they are really about to pounce, you know, that tail might get stiff. It might go straight out from the body. There's a number of things that the tail could show you. Now, the ears and the eyes. So, the ears they might get be very erect when they're looking, but if they're not comfortable and they're trying to ward off, they might kind of go off to the side or they might rotate back, curl back towards each other so that they're high back on each side.



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Now obviously a dog with prickly ears is going to be very, very different than a dog with floppy ears, but you'll see that same movement. Confident with a floppy ear dog is going to go up if they're a little bit worried, it might rotate back. Okay.

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So, the eyes now, like a dog who is stressed, they might do what wall eyes. You can see the whites of their eyes; their eyes are big and dilated. They might have a hard eye, which means they're staring hard at that other dog. They might have, shift their gaze and shift back as a sign of "I'm getting very, very stressed in this environment." They might turn their head away entirely saying, "Yeah, this isn't good. I'm really trying to alleviate some of the stress by turning away."

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All right. Now let's look at our dog's mouth. So, a dog that's relaxed will have a really soft mouth that may or may not be panting, but you can see it's relaxed. Now when they're tensed or stressed, that mouth might be open, but you can see some wrinkling at the corners because they're tightening their lips. The mouth, obviously they might drool.

Now, not all drool means a dog is stressed. You know, some drool might be like, "I'll have what she's having." Right. You can take any one of these characteristics and say, "Oh, that dog is stressed. That dog is getting really upset." But in combination with others in the situation, you can say, "Okay, my dog needs me to intercept here. We got some problems."

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So, the dog might lick their lips. They might lick the tip of their nose. They might open mouth pant, even though it's not hot out. They might peel their lips back, not making any noise, but just peel their lips back to show all their teeth, or they might make noise. They might growl. They might whine that goes up at the end, it's a very distinct whine. It goes *whining sound*. It goes very, very high at the end. They obviously they might growl. They might snarl. They might air snap. They might bite. So, all of these characteristics can be escalating, can be seen in combination. It could be "I'm uncomfortable", "I'm stressed", or "I feel afraid, and I want to protect myself".

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Now we go to the P, the posturing. So, a dog who is curious they might get a big, but a dog who's a little worried they might start crouching. They might pick up one paw, that's often a sign that the dog is a little bit stressed. They might turn their body sideways. They might retreat from the situation, back up. They might start scratching either around their collar or just in front of their armpit, they might start just start like scratching the air. It looks like these are all signs that there could be stress.

They might shake off, meaning they kind of turn away and shake their whole body all the way down to the tail. And the thing is things like a shake off might happen after the stress has gone by. It's a way that they are eliminating the stress from their body.

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A dog who is stressed all the hair behind their head, they might get piloerection, where all the hair goes up on their head. You might see the dog tremble, just tremble. You also might see them - no I guess this is more mouth - but yawn, a big yawn where the jaw's just kind of shudders at the end. You know it's one of the *big yawn sound* and then they, a big shudder at the end.



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So, all of these are signs that the dog is stressed. Now, what may happen is you might just see a mild sign of stress because it might be just, you know, it's a number 1. It's, you know, it's hardly registering. So, let's look at some of these events. Now, some of these events might be, "Oh my gosh, I want to do that!" to some dogs, and others "I'm a little bit worried about what's going on here." So, let's look at some of the events that may cause some stress that might stack up in a day for a dog.

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So, there's the obvious, there's a nail trim. Now, if you work hard that negative conditioned emotional response to a [nail trim can turn into a very positive conditioned emotional response](#). So that if you're a dog like my dog Tater Salad, or my puppy This!, or my dog Swagger, even though the three in my house that really love getting their nails done, that they have a very positive conditioned emotional response. But nail trimming might be one that dogs really have a negative response to.

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So, if your dog had a nail trim in the day, then we're going for a car ride. Now you might say, "My dog loves car rides." Well, there was a time where This! [got really car sick](#) so she didn't particularly love car rides. Or maybe your mom and your other mom had a big argument. And so, dogs pick up with the emotions of their people. So, you might find your dog suddenly sitting in the bathtub because of the energy of your argument.

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Or it could be like one of you was hammering something and you hit your thumb and then you're, all this anger, again emotion, it might be yelling. Or another one of you might be sitting at the table working through balancing your checkbook and you realize you're going to be short this month. And there's all this angst. Again, more stress that the dog may keep within them, but may show you because they're taking that on.

If you don't believe that your dog takes on the stress, first of all there's all kinds of science that will prove that, but just sit quietly and start laughing and see what your dog does. If there are anything like my dogs, they're going to come around with their tail wagging and they're going to bounce off me like "What, what, what?" Or if you were to cry, what do your dogs do? Some of my dogs will leave. Some of my dogs will start licking my face. It's really different.

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Or if you yell, what do your dogs do? Absolutely, your dogs pick up on your emotions. There is no doubt about it. Things like thunder create an [emotional response](#) in your dog or kids screaming or a change of routine. Hello COVID. "All of a sudden mom's home all day, but she's not paying attention. Normally when she's home, she pays attention to me. But she's doing this thing called work from home." So, she's not paying attention to you all day long.

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"But I don't get a break from the kids now. The kids used to go somewhere." Routine change can cause stress. As can the dog - the neighbor's dog - that's barking through the fence at you, or the fact that you didn't get your walk today, or the fact that mom wants to teach you swimming lessons and you don't really want to go in the water. You don't want to get your feet wet. Or it's raining out and you don't like walking in the rain because it makes you blink too much, and you don't want to go walking in the rain.



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So, all of these things, you know, people coming over to the house to visit, contractors in your house, all of these things are mild stressors. But there is a number of straws that are going to cause your dog to go over threshold. And it could be that your dog normally loves kids, and you see your nieces over and sitting on the couch beside the dog, and she puts her arm around your dog. And all of a sudden, you see your dog lip lick and give a big yawn. That's the time where you intervene. And you say, "Hey, let's get off the couch and play ball."

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So, you are changing the [interaction between the child and the dog](#). So that it's one where the child isn't physically in contact. So, you know, a lot of kids like to poke or hug or squeeze the paw or look in the lips. And again, some days that might be okay. But some days it might not be. And if you're aware of all those signs of stress you can then say, "I'm going to stop the stress or alleviate those triggers."

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So, what can you do if you see that your dog is stressing? Well, the first thing you're listening to this podcast, so this is great because you are now aware of trigger stacking, and it now makes sense why your dog suddenly did X. And so now what we want to do is what do you do when you see your dog stressed?

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First thing is you're going to either remove the trigger that's causing the stress or remove the dog from the environment. That's the first thing. So, we need to eliminate the stress immediately and it's easy done. Remove the dog or remove the stressor. In the case of the little girl putting their arm around your dog, you eliminated that stressor by creating distance and giving them a new activity to play game.

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Okay. Now what we want to do is help that dog lower their cortisol. So, we don't have to wait for that half-life of an hour. And you can do it by number one, what I love to do is play tug. Physical exercise helps to de-stress.

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So, if you took my dog when the dogs were barking and rushing towards her, there's no way she would've played tug at that moment, or the moment after. Likely would have been way too over threshold. But the dog coming towards her without barking and looking stiff, you know, she might've been excited. But once that dog left, I know for a fact she would have played tug.

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So, getting your dog to move physically is a really, really good thing that you can do. Second cousin to that would be a trick.

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So, getting the dog to jump up and hand target, getting the dog to weave between your legs, getting the dog physically moving. If you're a member of Wag Nation, that'll be easy because every month we add a new trick to Wag Nation. If you're not a member, I'm going to give you a [super special opportunity](#). Check out the show notes to a [link to Wag Nation](#) and just for people who listened to the podcast, a great opportunity you'll find right there in the show notes.



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Sometimes you have a bad training session. And it might be a bad training session because things didn't go well that can cause stress. Might be a bad training session because you inadvertently don't know about using games as a way of training, or you don't know about how reinforcement-based training really works. And so, every time you train, you are correcting and telling the dog they're wrong and giving them a collar correction.

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That adds stress and then you need to de-stress. So, if I've had a training session where my dog didn't get as many rewards as I would've liked her to, I might then de-stress by going for a big walk or letting her go for a swim. The good news is the way that we train, the cues that we use, sit, down, stand or do a trick, all of the cues actually help to de-stress a dog because they are triggers that create a positive conditioned emotional response.

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It's awesome. I call it talking dirty to my dogs when I will just say words that they love, like "see-saw" or "weave" or "jump" and my dogs go nuts. There's no dogs up here right now, so nobody's going nuts. But those are words that have meaning because they're trained with reinforcement and fun and games and interactions between us. Okay. The next thing you're going to do is you're going to go home and you're going to go in your journal and you're going to write what happened and you're going to plan.

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Because the best way we can serve our dogs is to start minimizing the things that are triggering them in their life. And in order to do that, what we're going to have to do is generalize all of the positive CERs to all different environments. So, you know, my dog may love to tug here in my office or downstairs in the kitchen and then in the living room. And I want to grow to outside the house and in down the road in the park and all these different... we want to create CERs that generalize beyond the little bubble that we live in.

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We want to take those things on the road so that we have these positive CERs that help de-stress a dog when they've had a minor incident of stress. The second thing you want to do is you want to make a list of all the things that stress your dog. Now I gave you a few examples, but there may be others like going to the vets or living through a thunderstorm or you name it. You know them for your dog, make a list of all those stressors. And then you're going to work on desensitizing them and counterconditioning them.

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Here on Shaped by Dog I talked a little bit about that in [episode number 66](#), where I was working on This!'s resource guarding. But desensitization means we are lowering the intensity of the trigger for the dog. But lowering the intensity isn't enough. We need to also countercondition that and what we're doing is we're taking a negative experience like I've done with This! with dogs.

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She used to see a dog in the distance, see a dog walk by and absolutely go off growling and trying to get away and being so over threshold. But now I've conditioned so many positive CERs, her positive conditioned emotional responses that the presence of dogs doesn't trigger her anymore.



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So, what you need to do is go over that list of things that trigger your dog and work to desensitize and countercondition better responses at the same time generalizing good CERs that you can use anywhere and everywhere that you're out and about with your dog. [Episode number 71](#) here on Shaped by Dog is also a really, really good one for you to listen to because I go over the fear response and how emotions are involved and what you can do.

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So, we all love our dogs, and we know that long-term stress decreases longevity. None of us want that for our dogs. It's in our dog's best interest and in our best interest to keep them all around as long as possible and one way we can do that is helping our dogs to live the most joyful and best life ever by minimizing, mitigating the stress that they feel in their life by the steps I outlined in today's podcast. I'll see you next time here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Wag Nation: Special Opportunity to Join](#)

[Podcast Episode 111: How An Anchor Dog Can Help Overcome Your Dog's Anxiety Or Reactivity](#)

[Podcast Episode 4: T.E.M.P. \(Tail, Eyes/Ears, Mouth, Posture\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 107: Pedicure Please: 3 Steps To Dog Nail Trimming Or Grooming Success At Home!](#)

[Podcast Episode 75: Stop Motion Sickness: Helping Your Puppy or Dog Love the Car](#)

[Podcast Episode 103: Excited Or Suspicious Dog? Dealing With Your Dog's Emotions](#)

[Podcast Episode 25: Why All Dogs Can Bite and How to Reduce the Risk with R.E.A.D.](#)

[Podcast Episode 66: Resource Guarding: Dog vs Dog Aggression](#)

[Podcast Episode 71: Pro Dog Trainer's Secret to Help Your Naughty Dog](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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