

Harnessing Excitement While Training Your Dog: Understanding Arousal For Better Behavior

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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I've recently realized that people quite often mistake their dog's excitement with over arousal. And I think what they're missing is how critically important excitement is to success in dog training. So today, I'm going to share with you how you can tell if your dog is over aroused or they're just excited and what you can do to both make sure you have optimal excitement and what to do if they are over aroused.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And you know, for me personally, my goal when I'm training any dog is to get a cooperation between the dog and myself so that they understand that I'm not going to force them to do anything. I'm going to inspire them.

So, it's cooperative training that creates a calm and a closeness. So, regardless of what it is that I'm going to ultimately end up doing with that dog, cooperation, calm, and closeness is always at the middle of it. And you might say, "Well, Susan, heck, you do dog agility. Like, you don't, where's closeness and calmness in that?" Guess what? Everything, including my high drive agility dogs.

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There's a trust that comes from the cooperation that we have in our training. And they will not be able to perform at their highest level if there isn't an inner calm to what looks like this exterior of mayhem. It's calm, and it's a closeness between us that creates the performance that many people think looks like hysteria, but really is a well calculated, orchestrated performance.

So often people will say, "Well, Susan, I just want my dog to settle down. I want my dog to settle down." I need you to understand that when you try to force calm, you actually are suppressing. And it is possible, especially with force, with physical force to put the dog into a moment of fear where that you will suppress behavior.

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But I know if you're listening to this podcast that is not something that's that you want. And so today we're going to discover what does optimal excitement mean? What does it look like? And is your dog really over threshold? And honestly, even if you're training your own service dog, this is so important.

At the end of today, I'm going to share with you how I can help guide your next steps on this journey. But it's so important that you understand the framework of what I'm going to present to you today. In [podcast episode number 86](#), I presented to you something I called the arousal curve. The scientific name is the Yerkes-Dodson curve.

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And what it is, is it shows a graph with along the bottom is arousal, and you might consider that as excitement state. And there's obviously a dog sleeping is in a very low aroused state. And at the very far end of the bottom or the X axis is a dog that is in a very, very heightened state of arousal.

And along the Y axis is the dog's performance. And at the bottom left corner, the performance is very weak. And at the top is a very engaged high-level performance.



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Now, you're going to say, "Performance, Susan. Well, I'm not doing a trick dog performance. Why do I need to care?" Because performance for you might be your dog's performance when a guest enters your house. What does that look like?

Or your dog's behavior when you're walking down the street, and a cyclist goes by, and you ask them to sit. Are they able to follow simple cues from you in that heightened aroused state? And so, I need for you to understand that at the very, very left-hand side of this arousal curve is a dog who is sleeping.

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So, their ability to perform when they're sleeping is pretty much nil, unless your goal is a sleeping dog. But for most of us, we want a dog to engage with us. We want them to retrieve a ball. We want them to walk down the street beside us without pulling, without lunging, without barking. We want a performance of something.

So, this curve is so important to each and every one of us. And any of you listening to this that wants to perform in a dog sport with your dog, then this also covers all of the skills we are going to want to teach our dog and for them to be able to perform with that cooperative, calm, and close state with us.

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So, in the very middle of this curve is what's called the optimal zone for peak performance. That's where your dog is so dialed in to what you want them to do. They will do anything you ask immediately. So, for some of you that could maybe only happen when you're alone in the house and you call your dog to the kitchen, and you've opened the refrigerator door, and you grab a piece of cheese.

It's a starting point. That could be the only place you get that optimal performance where the dog will come when they're asked, they will sit when they're asked. You are getting this cooperation. You're getting a dog that feels close to you.

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Now at the left-hand side of that curve is a dog that is not aroused at all. And what happens, this is true of people as well. If you aren't engaged enough, then you're taking in everything. And so, some family member might be trying to talk to you, but you are like, "Who's— is that a truck? Is that an Amazon truck that just got delivered? Is that—?"

So, you're really not that engaged with what they're having to say. I picture myself in history class in high school where maybe I did a lot of doodling on my book. So, at the lower end of the arousal curve, our engagement is not great.

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We take in way too much stimulation from our environment. Therefore, our performance is very weak. It's very weak. So, when people say, "I just want my dog to calm down." What you're really saying is, "I want my dog to underperform. I don't really want them to be at their best." So, I know that's not what you want.

But at the far right of this arousal curve, we have dogs that are what's called going over threshold. They are so aroused. Instead of them taking in too much information because their focus is so broad, their focus narrows so much that they are singularly focused on something. It could be you're walking a dog near the water, and they just love water. And you say, "Well, you have to sit, before you swim."



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And they're like, "No! Water, water, water, water!" They can't focus on anything. A dog chasing a cat. You may be screaming their name to come back, but that focus is narrowed. They might not even be able to hear you in that state.

So, it's not like they're blowing you off or ignoring you. If they are truly that over aroused that they won't be able to physically respond to you. It's not possible in that state. So, we talked about these arousal states. What is a dog like, if they're motion sensitive, when they see another dog running, or if they see a child running, or they see a kid on a skateboard or a cyclist go by, what is that arousal state at that moment?

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What is the dog's arousal state when another dog lunges in their face? So, we're talking about these arousal states, but what those are is a glimpse in time. They are a sliver of time. And I think it's more appropriate for us to be talking about arousal pathways.

An arousal pathway might be a dog who's sleeping, who hears the car keys being picked up, and they immediately go into their optimal zone of, 'I know where that car is, and I'm going to run to the front door, and I'm going to perform the best good doggy routine so I can get to go with you in the car.'

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So, an arousal pathway might be going all the way up to the edge of going over threshold, but with your good training, you can bring that dog back with a guided emotional pathway back to a more optimal zone for what you want them to be doing with you.

So, that you're walking down the street, and your dog can see a cat and go, "Who's that? It's a cat. Oh, it's a cat. Yeah." And then they can get back and engage with you. They learn because you've helped them regulate their emotional pathways. They get to a point where they can self-regulate.

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They don't have to lunge at the leash and claw at the concrete when they see a cat. They can go, "Oh yeah, hey, that was a cat. Yeah, that's cool." Isn't that a brilliant way to be? No matter where that dog is, what state they're in, you can either guide that emotional pathway up to be more in the optimal zone for learning and engagement from you.

Or you can guide it down where there might be in a very excited state, but that might not be optimal for what you want at this time. Now, I don't believe anyone any dog works their best when they're on the lower left-hand side of the page. And I know a lot of people will say, "Well, Susan, my dog's a service dog." They need to be calm. They can be excited and still be calm. That is possible.

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And if you never help your dog experience that emotional pathway from being very under aroused to being very excited and then back down, then that lack of experience will mean they may go from zero to 60 and not be able to self-regulate.

So, I think it's important for all dogs, regardless of what their role is in your family life that all dogs need to be able to have somebody help them guide that emotional pathway so that the ultimate goal is that they can guide it themselves. So, what are some of the things that can take a dog into a more arousing state?



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It's simple. It's excitement, that's something that they love to do. So, a reinforcement history has caused them to know what's going to happen. Therefore, anticipation creates arousal. Anticipation is a biggie. The pattern of reinforcement is what is going to get our dog excited for what is about to happen.

Now, frustration is also another key to getting a dog over aroused. It could be frustration from a dog who's chained up in a backyard and they see kids or other dogs walking by and they can't get at them. That's [barrier frustration](#). Frustration of a dog that's, you know, locked in their kennel and grandma's home and they want to see grandma.

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So, that frustration can cause a dog to go from 'I'm happily chewing on my bone in this crate' to 'I am now vocalizing and dancing'. So, the ultimate goal is to be able to minimize the arousal a dog may experience due to frustration and be able to maximize yet control the excitement or arousal that a dog experiences due to anticipation, the history of reinforcement, and the excitement of future reinforcements.

So, how can we tell if our dog is excited or our dog is over threshold, is over aroused, is redlining, whatever it is you want to call it. Now, this is a difficult one because so many people, if they've had a breed of dog that has been more subdued and they go out and they buy a very high drive, like a Belgian Malinois, and they've never experienced anything except a little lap dog, they may think that a simple game of tug as a dog is their puppy going way over threshold.

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But let me share with you some of the ways you can really dial this in. There'll be some physical characteristics. Their body movement might get agitated, might get stiff, might get more frenetic. Obviously, as I mentioned, their focus narrows therefore, they might like just, run. Run into a wall, run in front of a car if they were chasing something that they were really focused on.

Let's say you threw a ball, and it went out of your yard and went across the street. They might not care who or what is in the way. They might knock over grandma. They may run over the poor little toddler, whoever is in their path to get that ball. That is a dog who possibly might be over aroused at that point.

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An over aroused dog will not be able to follow your simple cues. So, if your dog is jumping all over your guests because, "Oh my gosh, I'm so excited." And you say, "Sit.", and they go, "Haven't heard that word in my life." It's not that they are purposely disobeying. It's that they have gone over threshold.

And we need to recognize it's not them being bad. It's just them being over aroused. Remember, guiding that emotional pathway to an optimal zone of arousal, you will have a dog who will be able to have beautiful [greeting of your guests](#).

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But you're not going to get it when you have a dog currently that goes from zero to a hundred. So, that over aroused dog is going to show physically more tension in their body. Their eyes may be fixed. They aren't able to respond to simple cues.

They are completely focused on one thing and they're flat out just not thinking. And so, what can we do now? So, to help our dogs to [be able to self-regulate](#), we first have to be able to guide them through the emotional pathway so that they can know what it's like to be excited and to be calm.



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And so, there's several things that I recommend. Number one, I strongly encourage you to teach your dog our [Relaxation Protocol](#). Yes, this is something I encourage people to use when they want to teach a dog to accept having their nails trimmed or be groomed.

But actually, this is something I teach all of my puppies very, very early in their life because it helps me to put in calming triggers. Now, you're not going to have a dog who is like lunging and barking at another dog and use your relaxation protocol cues to change that. But you will have ways to help that dog regulate. And here's what I mean.

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When I'm teaching the Relaxation Protocol, I'll put in triggers like long, calming body pats on my dog. Or long pulls of their ear, starting at the base of their ear, these long calming pulls. Or scratching the dog's chest. So, all part of my Relaxation Protocol. I'm not going to do it initially, but it's part of the growing procession of relaxation.

And when I have a relaxed dog, I will do the long calming body strokes, the scratching on the chest, the pulling of the ears, and the soft speaking of their name. Now that I have all those, when I have my dog and they're somewhere where I see they're getting a little bit more excited, instead of going, "Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, what are you doing?" I'll just gently reach down and pull on their ear or calmly pat the dog.

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So, teaching your Relaxation Protocol, using it in all different environments, and then taking some of those triggers and putting them into situations you really need to calm your dog, that is going to help your dog to be able to go down to a lower state of arousal. Of course, some dogs might be over aroused immediately by an environment.

And for those dogs, we need to work on desensitization or generalizing environment. So, maybe new environments are overwhelming for some dogs, and they may instantly become over aroused or familiar environments that they have had plenty of reinforcement may immediately create this heightened state of arousal.

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And so, we need to help create a better behavior for your dog so they know that the thing before the thing, they don't get off leash at the beach when they haven't shown that they can sit calmly. Or we help teach them how to get out of the car in a calm state and walk calmly on a leash before they get the thing that they really, really want.

It's all about layers of learning. You've heard me spoke about this on this podcast before. It's all part of our online dog training programs where you get layer number one, and if you get a dog who's super aroused, then you can go back and do something like a [Hand Target](#) to back that dog away from this overstimulating environment.

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You can use your [Reinforcement Zone](#) to turn and get the dog into a calmer state further away from the stimulus that is putting them into that highly aroused state. The frustration, I mentioned frustration is a big trigger to overarousal. Well, that frustration can be avoided when you're training with clarity and those layers of learning is what helps you to train with clarity.



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So, we want to minimize. We can't avoid all frustration. And quite honestly, there's some frustration that we use in our training by getting a dog, by holding them back and you getting out in front and calling their name and the person holding them, the dog getting really excited because they want to see you.

That's using a little bit of frustration in our training because it's getting our dog into a more aroused state, which is huge because the thinking and the learning happens in that optimal zone of learning or optimal zone of performance. So, we want to minimize the frustration that we don't want our dogs to experience.

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The frustration of failing because they can't figure out what we want because maybe the expectation for your dog's performance in that environment was way out of line. So, that's another way we're going to help our dog with their emotional pathway is to temper our own expectations, look at the dog we have, know what we want, and then follow the protocol of using games of choice like [ItsYerChoice](#) or [Crate Games](#) or some of our many Recaller Games that helps a dog know you have autonomy.

I am not going to force you to be under control. I'm going to give you the tools to empower you to make really good choices. Because self-control really is only a value when the dog wants to show you that they can make those good choices.

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Impose control, "Leave it! "Don't you." "I don't—." That's not what we want. And all that is going to do is add more anxiety to your dog's life. So, the goal is to guide your dog through their emotional pathways, to embrace excitement, to ultimately get the calm and closeness with your dog through cooperation in all your training.

And if you are listening to this and you say, "That sounds amazing. That's something I would really love to have for my dog." Then I'm going to extend this special opportunity to you as a podcast listener.

If you would like to experience how to teach the Relaxation Protocol, how to teach your dog layered skills like ItsYerChoice and Crate Games and Hand Targets and all of the other games that come with being a Recaller's dog including having a dog who can calmly retrieve a toy and bring it right back to your hand without going over threshold in the meantime, then you need to be a part of our Recallers program.

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It's a program that we only offer on a limited basis, a few times throughout the year. But because you're listening to this episode, and because I know Recallers will give you the tools to create the guidance of your dog's emotional pathway, I would love for you to be a part of the program.

And all that you have to do is send an email to my team. The email address is wag as in wag that excited, appropriately aroused dog, wag@dogsthat.com. And in the subject line, write the word "Pathways".

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And my team will know you were listening to this podcast, and you would like an opportunity to get an invitation to be a part of our Recallers program at the absolute best investment that we ever offer to people. So, I want you to have what I have with my dogs, that calm, cooperative closeness.



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And I know you can get it. I know you can have a dog that can self-regulate when guests come to the door. I know you can have it because I've seen it happen in so many of our Recallers students. So, if that's something that you would like my help in achieving, just send that email to my team and then trust me, your world's about to change.

If all of this makes sense to you, I would love to hear from you. I would love to know, have you been one of those people who've been a little bit afraid to let your dog get too excited?

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If you've been told don't let your dog tug because that excitement is going to turn them into this raving lunatic, I'd love to hear what people have told you in the past and what you now think about a dog that's showing joy and engagement in their interactions with you. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Recallers Opportunity:

Write to us at wag@dogsthat.com with the subject line **Pathways**

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 86: How to Train Unmotivated or Overexcited Dogs](#)

[Podcast Episode 88: Barrier Frustration: Help for Fence Fighting, Leash, Reactivity and Window Guarding](#)

[Podcast Episode 109: Project Calm Dog: Prevent Over Enthusiastic Greetings](#)

[Podcast Episode 219: Self- Regulation Helping Shy, Hyper, Anxious Or Fearful Dogs To A Better Life](#)

[Podcast Episode 191: Get Your Dog To Calm Down With This Common Sense Protocol For Relaxation](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Target Training for Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

[YouTube Video: Understanding Your Dog's Reinforcement Zone \(RZ\) with Susan Garrett](#)

[ItsYerChoice Summit](#)

[Crate Games Online](#)



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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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