



# Reactive Dog Walking Checklist

## *Calm Walking Club*

*A handout for calmer, safer walks*

### **Before the Walk**

A calm walk starts before you even leave the house. Preparation helps both you and your dog feel safer, more connected, and less overwhelmed.

#### **Your Essentials**

##### **Treat Pouch Filled with High-Value Treats**

Bring treats your dog truly loves — soft, smelly, easy-to-eat rewards work best. Treats help create positive associations and can redirect your dog before reactions escalate.

A standard leash gives you more control and communication than retractable leashes. A shorter, steady leash helps your dog feel more secure and prevents sudden tension.

##### **Harness or Secure Collar**

Use equipment that is safe, comfortable, and escape-proof. Front-clip harnesses can help with pulling while reducing pressure on your dog's neck.

##### **Poop Bags**

Always come prepared. Picking up after your dog helps keep walking spaces clean and welcoming for everyone.

##### **Water + Bowl**

Reactive dogs can become mentally and physically tired quickly. Water breaks can help your dog decompress during or after stressful moments.

## **Charged Phone**

Useful for emergencies, navigation, or contacting support if needed only. Now is the time to focus on your dog - the phone can wait.

## **Emergency Contact Tag on Dog**

Make sure your dog's tags are current and easy to read.

## **Your Mindset**

### **Stay Calm and Relaxed**

Dogs notice our body language, breathing, and tension. The calmer you are, the safer your dog will feel.

### **Keep Expectations Realistic**

Not every walk will be perfect. Success might simply mean creating space, avoiding triggers, or recovering more quickly than before.

### **Focus on Connection, Not Perfection**

Your relationship with your dog matters more than perfect obedience. Celebrate small moments of engagement and trust.

### **Plan Quiet Routes When Possible**

Choose quieter times of day or less crowded locations to reduce stress and create more opportunities for success.

### **Give Yourself Extra Time**

Rushing increases stress for both you and your dog. Slow walks often lead to calmer experiences.

# Reading Your Dog

Dogs communicate through body language long before barking or lunging happens. Learning to notice early stress signals allows you to respond before your dog becomes overwhelmed.

## Early Stress Signals

### Lip Licking

Quick tongue flicks can be a sign of discomfort or uncertainty.

### Yawning

Yawning outside of sleepy situations may signal stress or an attempt to self-soothe.

### Stiff Body

A tense posture often means your dog is becoming uncomfortable or alert.

When dogs turn their head but keep watching a trigger, you may notice the whites of their eyes showing.

### Ears Pinned Back

Flattened ears can indicate nervousness or fear.

### Tail Tucked or Very High/Stiff

Tail position can reveal emotional state. A stiff tail may signal high arousal, while a tucked tail often indicates fear.

### Hyper-Focused Staring

A hard stare at another dog, person, or object may mean your dog is becoming fixated.

### Sudden Sniffing or Avoidance

Some dogs disengage by sniffing, turning away, or slowing down when they feel overwhelmed.

## **If You Notice These Signs**

### **Increase Distance from the Trigger**

Distance is one of the most effective tools for helping reactive dogs feel safe.

### **Scatter Treats on the Ground**

Sniffing and foraging can help lower stress and redirect attention.

### **Turn and Walk Away Calmly**

You do not need to “push through” difficult situations. Calm exits help prevent escalation.

### **Use a Cheerful Voice**

Soft, upbeat communication can reassure your dog and interrupt tension.

### **Pause and Let Your Dog Decompress**

Sometimes your dog simply needs a moment to observe, sniff, breathe, and reset.

## **During the Walk**

Reactive dog walks are about safety, confidence, and communication — not covering the most distance.

### **Calm Walking Goals**

#### **Reward Check-Ins with You**

When your dog voluntarily looks at you, acknowledge it with praise or treats. Check-ins build connection and focus.

#### **Praise Calm Behavior**

Notice and reward small calm moments, such as relaxed walking, sniffing, or calmly observing triggers from a distance.

#### **Keep Leash Loose When Possible**

Tight leashes can increase frustration and tension. Aim for soft, relaxed handling whenever it is safe.

## **Cross the Street Early if Needed**

Advocating early helps prevent reactions before they happen.

## **Avoid Crowded Areas When Overwhelmed**

Sometimes the best choice is reducing stimulation and helping your dog succeed in easier environments.

## **Advocate for Your Dog's Space**

It is okay to say:

- “My dog needs space.”
- “Please don't approach.”
- “We're training.”

Protecting your dog's comfort builds trust.

## **Helpful Cue Reminders**

### **“Look at Me”**

Encourages your dog to disengage from distractions and reconnect with you.

### **“Let's Go”**

A simple movement cue used to calmly leave situations.

### **“Find It”**

Scatter treats on the ground and encourage sniffing to redirect focus and lower arousal.

### **“This Way”**

A gentle direction-change cue that helps avoid triggers smoothly.

# Trigger Tracker

Trigger	Distance	Reaction Level (1-5)	Notes
Dogs			
People			
Bikes			
Cars			
Sounds			
Other			

## After the Walk

The end of the walk matters just as much as the beginning. A thoughtful cool down helps your dog recover from stress, process the experience, and return to a calmer emotional state.

### Cool Down

#### Water Break

Offer fresh water after the walk, especially after exciting or stressful moments. Drinking and resting can help your dog settle physically and emotionally.

#### Sniff Time or Decompression

Allow your dog a few quiet minutes to sniff grass, wander calmly, or relax in a low-pressure environment. Sniffing naturally lowers stress and helps dogs decompress.

#### Calm Praise

Use a soft voice and gentle praise to reinforce safety and connection. Even difficult walks can end on a positive note.

#### Short Notes About Wins

Keeping simple notes can help you recognize progress over time. You may notice patterns, improvements, or triggers that become easier to manage.

Helpful things to track:

- What went well
- Which triggers were hardest
- Recovery time after reactions
- Distance your dog could handle comfortably
- Favorite rewards or calming strategies

## **Today's Wins**

Progress with reactive dogs is often built from small moments. Celebrate what your dog *could* do instead of focusing only on what was difficult.

### **My Dog Recovered Quickly**

Recovery matters more than perfection. A shorter recovery time is a huge sign of growth.

### **We Created Distance Successfully**

Choosing space before reactions escalate is a valuable skill for both handler and dog.

### **We Avoided a Meltdown**

Sometimes success simply means preventing overwhelm.

### **My Dog Checked In with Me**

Moments of eye contact, attention, or choosing you over distractions build trust and confidence.

### **I Stayed Calm and Patient**

Your emotional regulation matters too. Calm handling helps your dog feel supported and safe.

### **Additional Wins to Celebrate**

- A calmer leash walk
- Faster disengagement from triggers
- More confidence in new environments
- Better recovery after surprises
- A peaceful moment together

Remember: progress is rarely linear. One hard walk does not erase growth.

## **Reminder**

Reactive dogs are not “bad” dogs. Small wins count. Calm, consistent practice builds confidence over time.

