

TRIGGER STACKING



Is Your Dog...High?



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The Fallout From Stress Hormones

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Clients are surprised when I suggest their dog is “under the influence.” When they reflect on their dog’s recent overreacting to a situation in which they might normally cope like a civilized canine, it makes sense.

Higher than usual stress hormone levels may leave your pet taking on the other neighborhood dogs like a drunk at a bar. You may be able to relate more than you realize.

When delayed for work by an unexpected outfit change due to spilled coffee, traffic pile-up and a line for the elevator all in the same morning, it becomes all too much. With each event, your stress level compounds and you are less able to deal with the next surprising incident. You likely find your own behavior diminishing with each passing event. Tempers may flare and patience wares thin more quickly when multiple stressors happen in short order. This is referred to as “trigger stacking.”

Cortisol and adrenaline rise in our systems during stressful situations and are part of the internal “flight or fight” mechanism we all need to stay safe and survive. It’s nature’s way of helping us protect ourselves.

The same happens with our pets. Stress would usually diminish over time, but when stacked, it's more difficult for them to calm and can push the dog over their stress threshold more easily, causing them to react.

Under normal stressful circumstances, these hormones can take 5-8 hours to leave the body. When "stacked," stressors can affect normal behavior patterns for days or even weeks in cases of chronic stress.

Research details the effects stress even has on animals in utero. Young born to highly stressed mothers react to stress with higher levels of cortisol and need more time for levels to decrease.

[Turid Rugaas](#), Norwegian author and noted canine body language expert asks shelters to wait six days or more to allow dogs to acclimate before making behavior-based euthanasia decisions.

The ability to learn, digestion, immunity, and energy usage are compromised in the face of trigger stacking. So, It's easy to see why careful attention to our own stress levels and our pet's is so vital.

Common Stressors

- Too much or too little physical exercise or socialization
- Inconsistency or major changes in daily routines
- Boredom from lack of mental stimulation
- Harsh or bullying training methods
- Pain from an old or undiagnosed injury or ailment
- New or uncomfortable situations

If you notice unusual fear or reactivity in your dog, allow them relief from stressors for up to a week to decompress and cope.