

All About Thresholds

What is a “threshold”?

It is a point or line that, when crossed, takes your dog from one emotional state to another. When a dog crosses that threshold, certain physiological or psychological effects begin to take place.

What does over threshold look like?

The most obvious example is a dog that suddenly becomes reactive—barking, lunging and snarling. But there are many other expressions of being over threshold. Some include:

- Zoomies
- Shut down or frozen
- Over-excitement (like jumping, mouthing, etc.)
- Distracted to the point of no connection
- Biting

What does it mean to have a dog go over threshold?

It generally means that the dog is behaving in a way that we don't like. But much more importantly, it means the dog is in a state of distress. It means that the dog is reacting rather than thinking. A dog generally cannot learn until he or she is brought back under threshold.

My dog's threshold seems to change—why is that?

Threshold is not static—it varies depending on a whole set of criteria. For example, a dog may be insecure in new places, not get along with other dogs, and be aroused by movement. None of these alone will put the dog over threshold, but if they all happen at the same time, or within a short period of time, then they will push him over. Things that can affect threshold are:

- Intensity of the trigger*
- Number of triggers (the more the bigger the risk)
- Proximity or how close they are to the trigger
- Frequency or how often that trigger is happening
- Feeling hungry, thirsty, tired or in pain can all impact
- Accumulated stress (it takes 3 to 10 days for stress hormones to return to normal)

***A trigger is not always something your dog is nervous about or afraid of; a trigger can be anything that increases your dog's arousal. For example, some dogs will go over threshold in rowdy play.**

How can you help your dog stay under threshold?

1. Learn what creates stress for your dog. Identify both positive stressors (like over-excitement in play) and negative stressors (like that scary dog).
2. Pay attention to your dog's body language, signals, and energy. For example, dogs often take treats roughly when they are getting close to threshold.
3. When you feel your dog's arousal go up, take action to change the picture—don't wait for him or her to go over.
 - Create distance
 - Do focus exercises to bring your dog into a thinking state
 - If you need to, leave a situation altogether

Should you work your dog close to threshold?

Ideally, you will find a balance between pushing your dog enough that he or she is building confidence and making progress, but not so much that it is causing undue stress.

Very important: *Going over threshold frequently will impede a dog's ability to make progress. If you are seeing little or no improvement in a problem area, consider that you may be working your dog too close to threshold, or over threshold.*

What can you do to if your dog goes over threshold?

- Get your dog out of the situation immediately. It is not a time for learning or for fixing problems.
- Take note on all of the factors that led to your dog going over.
- Make a plan for the next time so that you can prevent it from happening again.