

How to avoid accidental demotivation

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No one deliberately does something that is demotivating to their dog, however it is surprisingly easy to do, if you aren't aware of how it happens. Sometimes things we do that are pretty counterproductive just get to be habits and then we aren't even aware we are doing them.

It is true that your dog might be the one in a million who just loves to have you lean over them, pat them on the top of the head and loudly growl "what a good GRRRLLLLL" - or maybe that flinch reaction that your dog does tells you something.

Video a training session and just double check that you are mindful of the following things that can go awry.

1. **Know what you are aiming for when you train** – have criteria clear in your mind.

Inconsistent expectations create poor results and stress – unclear goals makes moving in the right direction difficult to see and reinforce.

2. **Only train with full attention, speed and energy**

If you don't have your dog's attention and focus – then train that- nothing else is as important to work on. Also don't allow yourself or your dog to go "off duty" in between exercises – put the dog away while you think, plan, move equipment etc. See the document with respect to [getting your dog in the right mindset](#) for tips on getting your dog ready to go and check out the document about [what they rehearse is what they get good at](#) for more related insight.

3. Train behaviors in smallest possible increments to get high success rate and raise criteria in little bits but rapidly

Break up behaviors into small pieces and isolate and train each one before assembling them into a more complex behavior. Also note that training things that you care about away from equipment and then moving them onto equipment (see get off equipment), can help make sure that the only learning the dog needs to do is to transfer everything they already know to a picture that is closer to what you envision for agility.

4. Only allow dog to struggle for 2 attempts – then change something, use training aides, or simplify to ensure success.

3 repetitions is enough for most dogs to learn – 3 mistakes means you've taught them how to make the mistake.

5. Aim for 80% success rate. Put money in the bank in advance of difficult challenges by asking and rewarding a few easy tasks first.

Low success rate is to be avoided but so is 100% success. Dogs that are never wrong quickly lose motivation to try – there is no differentiation for them.

If you repeat a tough exercise after failing the first time, and they fail again, you are 0 for 2. If you try again and dog slows to get it right or fails again, you have a choice of 0 for 3 or rewarding for being slow! Don't set yourself up or your dog for having to reward things that are iffy.

Same situation but you have banked 6 easy tasks in advance: after 3rd failed attempt you are 3 failures for 9 or still 70% successful and you can simplify or change without having to reward for slow or sloppy (or risk de-motivating).

At the same time, remember item 4. Many handlers have such a clear vision of the final product that they forget to break it down for the dog- and only think to train by repeating the final behavior, over and over and over.

6. Mark Exact Moment that desired behavior happens and reward for trying.

Use a consistent, rapid sound (click, yes, nice) to let the dog know they earned a reward. And keep in mind that when training something new, you can reward effort and a correct mindset, even if the behavior itself is not quite right. That may not mean that you give your whole handful of cookies, but you can say “awesome try dude” to reward the dog for trying instead of “ack, ack” which I guess the dog is supposed to understand as “don’t try anymore unless you are going to be perfect”.

7. Deliver and time reward to reinforce the behavior

Be precise about rewarding while, stationary or moving, near to you or far,, head position, body position etc. Practice this or at least take the time to reward well. A classic example is a handler who throws treats to a dog on a stopped contact. Of course the treat bounces and the dog is perfectly rewarded for leaning forward to get the treat, while the rear foot comes off. Now what do you do?

If you intend to reward the dog this way, then you have some foundation skills to build first - namely, do not reach for a treat that you can not get without shifting your weight. OR, just take the time to back to the contact and reward carefully.

8. Learn from mistakes. They aren’t bad, just interesting.

Do not react emotionally to a mistake (groan etc.). I don’t think you want to train your dog to do something in order to avoid making you unhappy. The only thing you really need to do with a mistake is learn from it yourself. You do not have to fix it immediately, in fact see item 9. below. You don’t even have to end on a good note, just stop and go do something else.

9. Don’t restart an exercise without rewarding, getting organized and setting up for success

Sloppy restarts create more mistakes, and frustration. The next repetitions are now polluted by the energy, confusion, stress of the mistake. Here is a classic example, the handler is working on a sequence that includes a pinwheel and the dog pulls inside the last jump in

the pinwheel, so they wrap the dog around their body and get them over that jump and go on. OK, so I guess technically they completed the sequence, but how does fixing the refusal by turning the dog around them help? Does that address the miscommunication in the path that resulted in the refusal in the first place? Is the approach angle over the last jump the same as when they were coming through the pinwheel and isn't that likely to create a new problem? What does the dog learn if you reward that sequence? What do they think if you don't?

10. **Be aware your dog is learning all the time**

It is really easy to be careful and precise about training when you go through the ritual of getting ready to train. You get your clicker and your treats, you head off to a contact obstacle to work the end behavior and you are diligent about placement of reward, proofing your release and releasing without movement. Awesome. Then later on your dog goes off course and you allow them, even encourage them, to run off the side of the A-frame because they were supposed to be in the tunnel - and worse, you loop them around and send them into the tunnel and throw a big party "that's what I wanted!" Two minutes later, you send them up the A-frame and they trickle off. "hey, that's not right" you notice. Now you have a dog that pauses and watches you coming down the a-frame in competition but does get into position, so you decide you want to speed them up, so you release them as soon as their feet get into the yellow. And then....