



Ditch the Routine



Dogs spend their days reading cues and predicting the next thing that is going to happen. For example, picking up the leash is a cue that they get to go for a walk, and they tend to get overexcited before you ever leave the house. Another example may be getting out the dog shampoo from a cupboard would be a cue or a predictor that a bath is coming, or your alarm clock is a cue that it is breakfast time.

It is common for people to have a routine because it makes us feel secure and organized. When something happens and our routine gets thrown off, we may feel a little stressed, but we can understand why the routine changes that day. We have a routine in our day. We do not have to spend a lot of time figuring out what we need to do next during our day because it is organized. It is not the same way for our dogs. Our dog can be extremely happy living in the moment. Our dogs who spend so much of their life looking for and following cues, they get overwhelmed when something is off during the day. We, someone, knock on the door the need to bark, when you start rouse from the bed the need to whine to get breakfast when you pick up the leash the predictor to the exciting walk is too much to handle, and they can help but bark, spin, and whine.

You may handle this, but what happens when you become ill, a new baby comes home, or you have an extremely reactive dog or fearful dog. When the routine gets thrown off, dogs will start to get stressed and exhibit behavior problems like barking, lunging, passing, and many more. For a dog that already has confidence issues, this can throw them off so much they may shut down or become overly reactive.

A dog who does not have a predictable routine does not have the ability to develop behavior problems to cues that they see all the time. For example, you pick up the leash, and your dog continues to rest calmly on their bed because it is no longer a predictor for a walk. We ditched the routine around the leash, and sometimes we put it on our dog for no reason, sometimes we put it on, walk out the front door, and go right back inside. We may even put it on to do a training session, or ask them to go to their bed. Now, when we pick up the leash, we have done so many things our dog no longer knows what to expect, and the leash becomes a non-event in our dog's lives. Dogs who don't have a predictable routine adjust to changes in their days better and have less anxiety because of missed cues. New things are less stressful, and they are better able to live in the moment because they don't have to read all of our predictable cues regularly.

Are you ready to ditch your routine?

It may feel overwhelming trying to ditch your entire routine with your dog right away, so here are some easy places to start practicing ditching the routine. If you have a problem area with your dog, make sure you focus on routine also.

Feeding your dog:

Feeding: Feeding our dogs is one of the most common routines that we have in our homes. We feel that we need to feed our dogs from a bowl most commonly twice a day. First thing in the morning and then 12 hours later. There are tons of better ways to feed our dogs than from a bowl. There are endless enrichment toys out there and different ways to use our dog's food. (Please see handout on ditching the dog bowl and canine enrichment) We can also change the times we feed our dogs. We may not feed them until after our morning shower instead of before it, or we might feed small bits of food all day long at random times to reward behavior we like.



Walking: Walking is another area we are extremely predictable; we put on our shoes, get out the harness, and pick up the leash. By the time we get to the door, our dogs have had so many cues that we are taking them on a walk that they are so excited they pull us the entire walk, and training seems impossible. We tend to walk them at the same times and in the same location, so they know every house with a barking dog, they know what neighbors stop and give them treats, so they become hypervigilant to the houses where dogs bark and pull you all the way to get their yummy treat. Easy things you can change are where you are walking, when you walk, how long your walk is, or ditching the walk all together for a few days until you can break some of your other routines. Start making the leash a non-event, putting on your shoes, going in and out the front door so that none of these things no longer mean a walk.

Leaving them alone in the house: Dogs who struggle with separation anxiety know many cues that you are getting ready to leave them and become increasingly stressed long before you ever actually leave them alone. Some common predictors of leaving are, doing your hair or makeup, putting on your shoes, getting your work bag or purse, picking up car keys, placing dogs in their crates, giving them one special toy they only get when you leave, putting on dog TV, or playing special dog music only when you leave the house. Some of the things we do are an attempt to help them be more calm when we leave, but if we only ever do it when we leave them, it causes more stress instead of calming them. Now they are panicked and we never even left the house! It's no surprise they are destructive while we are gone!



Other common areas to focus on would be getting in the car. (Sometimes this is exciting if you often go fun places or scary if you only ever go to the vet) Another area would be training. We often get our treat ready and train in the same locations and then wonder why they only listen in the house when we have our treats in hand. Lastly, any time your dog is over-aroused, that is often a place where routine has cause excitement, and we need to change up what we are doing.

Switching things up and ditching your routine is one of the best things you can do for your dog! It helps create a dog that handles random changes with confidence, a calmer dog because we do not spend so much time predicting exciting events. It allows our dogs to live in the moment instead of feeling like they need to be anticipating what is going to happen next repeatedly!