

Mindfulness for Dogs

PART 1: 500 Yes's



Maggie's
Rescue

All social animals work for accurate information - this is their currency. Desirable behaviour often goes unrewarded, and many dogs are told "no", "leave it" or "uh-ah" multiple times a day. It is really difficult to be told no all the time. Compare this to a workplace where your job description is not clearly outlined and you are not sure what your employer wants you to do while continually being told what you have done wrong. What does it create? Poor work performance and increased anxiety. Employees perform at their best when they are given clear instructions. So do your dogs!

The concept behind this activity is to 'paint a picture' and 'fill in the gaps' - tell your dog 500 yes's a day when he/she is doing the right behaviour.

What counts as a Yes?



Sitting calmly and looking at you. That is it!

- For every positive interaction possible, respond with a smile and a "Yes!"
- This concept is taken from the 'Protocols of Deference' (taken from Overall KL: Manual of Clinical Behaviour Medicine for dogs and cats, 2013.)

Benefits of a Yes

Improve your communication between you and your dog by delivering consistent signals. If your dog looks at your face, he/she will learn to get accurate information

- Builds a bond and trust with your dog
- Your dog will learn to be calm and relaxed
- Improves your dog's anxiety levels and welfare
- Your dog will learn that you will answer their questions if he/she sits calmly and looks at you

How to Start:

Remember to do it every day!

- Find a treat that motivates your dog (high-value treats) - the harder the task, the higher the value reward required
- Fill your 500 Yes's treat jar EVERY day to ensure each treat is eaten by the end of the day to reward a sit and look
- Have a few different treat stations throughout your house so that you remember to reward this calm behaviour everywhere you and your dog are!

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PART 2: Catching Calm



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Catching calm is a simple exercise where we gently acknowledge your dog when they are just being calm, e.g. taking a deep breath or lying down (we often just ignore them when this happens). This will help them learn that when they are calm and composed, good things happen and will help them try to practice these emotional states and behaviours. When your dog is lying quietly and relaxed, whisper 'good dog!'.

This exercise is aimed at your dog maintaining its relaxed position and not increasing arousal levels at all, i.e. don't scare or startle your dog. We don't even want your dog lifting its head to look at you.

Catch calm as often as possible throughout the day.

AVOID:

- Looking at your dog
- Bending over or patting your dog
- Anything that will increase your dog's arousal level
- Giving your dog treats

REMEMBER:

- Rewards must always happen within half a second of the associated behaviour happen
- Only ever practice these exercises when your dog is in the green zone ie. No anxiety is present - This is the best state for learning.



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PART 3: Mat Training



Teaching your dog to settle quietly is one of the most useful exercises for a dog owner. Going to a mat becomes the cue to settle and be calming (a bit like us when we go and sit on the couch). It is also the foundation for teaching several other relaxation exercises, e.g. Sit/calm.look, spontaneous relaxation and deep breathing exercises.

By using a mat/towel/dog bed, you are giving your dog a visual of where you would like him/her to settle. A portable mat allows us to use it in different places, e.g. when visiting friends or having visitors, at cafes, vet clinics or travelling in a car.

NEVER use the mat as a form of punishment. It is a place where your dog feels safe.



Mat training video: https://youtu.be/Jb7_J5zgYsg



HOW:

- Use high-value treats (e.g. roast chicken or cheese) and toss a treat onto the mat
- Your dog will naturally move to the mat to investigate
- Say "Yes!" when your dog steps on the mat
- "Yes" becomes your bridging word to mark the behaviour
- Throw a treat away from the mat, so your dog leaves the mat
- Repeat and encourage your dog back to the mat by tossing a treat
- Once your dog is consistently moving to the mat, add a verbal cue "Go to your mat"

The duration of the mat training and the time spent staying on the mat is usually your hardest challenge.

- Stand in front of your dog while they are in a drop position
- Move your feet as if you were to walk away
- Your dog will naturally look to follow
- Be aware of their body language - if they look to lift their body, re-approach your dog and reinforce your dog with a high-value long-lasting chew to get them to calm and settle
- Finish the exercise with a 'release' cue, e.g. "Finish". This is so that your dog knows when the mat training is over

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PART 4: Blanket Exercise



In conjunction with 'mat training', the blanket exercise is a less formal exercise that encourages relaxation. The difference between mat training and the blanket exercise is that it is less about training with food, but rather rewarding with tactile interaction and massage to encourage relaxation. Food in training can often be arousing for some dogs, massage can be another way to reward your dog.

Firstly, choose a soft blanket that is comfortable, soft, thick and inviting to your dog so that they can comfortably lie down and relax.

- Place the blanket close to you, at the foot of the couch or kitchen table
- Gently encourage your dog to the blanket with a soft "Come"
- Never force them, your dog must approach on their own
- This exercise is not about obedience or asking them to sit or drop
- Once your dog is on the blanket, you can begin gently massaging behind their ears and down their body
- For some dogs, they may become excited and playful
- Give them a moment until they have settled and continue with the calming massage
- Always be aware of body language and how comfortable they are with your interactions
- Keep sessions short (approx. 5 mins each session)
- The aim of the exercise is for your dog to lie down in a relaxed state
- When they are relaxed, whisper "Good dog"

Your dog will begin associating the blanket with a calm atmosphere, massage and general relaxation. The presence of the blanket apart from providing comfort assists in relaxation and lowering stress in different circumstances.

You can pair the blanket exercises with music therapy. Refer to the [Dog Senses](#) Guide for music that promotes relaxation.

