

Layered Stress/Transition

What do I need to know about my new dog’s current stress?

Layered Stress Model Diagram



Our goal of discussing the Layered Stress Model is to both create empathy for the dog’s current state of mind and to understand that each dog has a different threshold. These four layers are all significant areas of stress in the shelter and have a direct impact on the dog’s ability to tolerate exposure to additional triggers. For the adopter, focusing on lowering or preventing the dog’s exposure to additional triggers is absolutely important; however, they should also be working to provide the dog relief for the other layers of stress.

- Health: this layer is the most fundamental and relatable to people as health directly affects behavior. We understand we are crabby when we are going through the following troubles:
 - Possible acute issues: discomfort from sleeping on a floor, exposure to URI, headache from noisy neighbors, stiffness from lack of exercise, surgery recovery, physical toll of stress, upset stomach due to new food, irritation to medications, injuries that are healing, heartworm treatment, etc.
 - Possible chronic issues: arthritis, allergies, skin irritation, dental problems, etc.
- Lifestyle: this concept discusses the dog’s ability to do biologically fulfilling activities. Without our interference dogs would move 10-20 miles per day, hunt, kill, fight and mate. In a home the dog would be able to make their own decisions: sleeping on the couch or on the floor in the sunshine, exploring the house, soliciting attention or moving away from people, which toy to chew on. In the shelter not only do the dogs lack the ability to make their own decisions but also their opportunity to be a dog and display normal dog behavior is limited. This includes each dog’s favorite joy-giving activities – some want to play with a ball, some want to run, some want to snooze, some want to snuggle. In the shelter the staff and volunteers attempt to provide for each dog’s needs but of course this is not the same as it would be in a home.
- Clarity: this layer focuses on the dog’s perspective of the outline of their day. What their role is, who these humans are, what the routine is, what is expected of them, what they can or can’t do, what is wrong or right behavior, etc. In the shelter the dogs do have a small bit

of structure as their day has an outline to it. However, they are handled by strangers frequently and each person has their own unique handling style. They are getting different types of food, taken to different areas, surrounded by other strange dogs who are loud, and more. Some dogs are in the shelter long enough that they can catch on to the pattern while others are only here for a short time and spend that time feeling confused and terrified.

- Imagine you start a new job and your employer means well but you just seem to be on different wavelengths. You don't get a job description so you're unclear what you're responsible for each day. Your schedule changes constantly so you're struggling to settle into a routine and this causes stress. Your boss gives inconsistent feedback: you were yelled at for being 5 minutes late today but you were an hour late last week and no one commented. The whole office uses a different messaging platform than you're used to so you feel like you're scrambling to communicate clearly. Lastly, the building is new to you and you keep getting lost. Some areas are off limits but no one has given you a map to where you should or shouldn't be within the building. Overall you're confused, discouraged and unclear in just about every aspect of this new job!
- Leash: in the shelter we are working on becoming a unified front in our leash handling by rolling out a protocol and teaching it to all handlers. However, there are still fluctuations with each person and this can be a source of confusion and/or frustration for dogs. The whole point of leashes and other barriers are to stop dogs from getting to something they want to – but we often don't empathize with the irritation this causes.

How does this apply to the adopter taking the dog home now?

- Research shows that the stress hormone, cortisol, elevates when the dog first goes home and continues to rise until it peaks on day three. After that, the stress hormone level slowly tapers down until it normalizes but can take over a week. This is the same hormone that triggers fight or flight.
- Health: for some dogs this layer just takes time to even out. We do recommend taking your dog to your private vet after a few weeks in your home to discuss if the dog has any specific needs. Exercise, a good diet, and a good transition plan are sometimes all that is needed for the dog's health layer to right itself. Also being sure to handle your dog thoroughly (more than just petting their head) to constantly monitor their body and look for any abnormalities is a good habit.
- Lifestyle: we need to find biologically fulfilling activities for our dogs to keep them psychologically healthy. As the adopter your job is to figure out what your new dog likes, and how to provide it or something similar. This can be different types of play (food play, toy play, personal play), going running or walking, getting involved in a dog sport (dock diving, flyball, agility courses, etc.), or going to a dog daycare for social time. Each dog is an individual and you will need to invest time to figure out what his/her preference is to satisfy and fulfill his/her dog-self.
- Clarity: structure is a common way to provide clarity to a dog in a new environment. Structure is not about being dominant over the dog and selfishly limiting their access to resources; but really it's about starting them off with only a few variables before giving them full freedom. Giving a new dog complete access (with some unsupervised time and no boundaries) to your other pets, your kids, your whole house, the yard, the furniture and every toy under the sun realistically sets them up to fail at least once. We haven't taught them what the expectations are but we require them to figure it out; and often we aren't very tolerant of their slip-ups along the way. This adds stress to both the dog and to the adopters. Instead what we recommend is to start the dog off small. Here are some standards you should think about for your new dog:
 - Kennel training – very important, recommended for 99% of the dogs leaving our care. Teaches them how to relax and helps them detox from the constant adrenaline rushes in the shelter. Gives them a safe space while they are slowly integrated with

other animals/people. Prevents destruction/accidents when home alone. Helps with potty training.

- Leave a leash dragging on the dog at all times for a minimum of 3 days. This enables you to respect the dog's space by being hands-off in your first few days with them and gives them the power to decide when to approach you. Going slow and leaving the leash on longer is always a safer bet.
- Start with the dog in one room for the first few days while building relationship and expectations then gradually introduce the dog to the rest of the home. Considering how small their shelter kennel was one room is still an upgrade and we shouldn't rush by requiring them to navigate a whole house.
- Don't allow the dog on the furniture until you have the relationship to ask the dog to move off it. We often see dogs returned because conflicts happened when owners attempted to touch a sleeping dog, reach over the dog, move the dog, etc.
- Intentionally craft slow introduction plans to new animals/people. For some families this can mean the dog does not meet anyone from outside the home until the adopters have spent a few weeks building a relationship with the dog and know what he/she needs to be successful meeting new people.
- Create a daily routine and give the dog time to get fluent with it before adding in more challenges.
- Imagine you've quit that other horrible job and you've started in a new office. Your boss has given you a training outline that sets you up to be successful with your responsibilities. You are given a set schedule that will open up to working from home in the future once you are proficient in your role. The feedback you receive is consistent and clear – you know what is expected. The communication platform is simple and practiced throughout the day so you pick up on it quickly. You were given a tour of your workspace and once your training is complete you will be shown the other departments as you need to have access to them. This job is a much better fit because you know what is expected, the communication and feedback are clear, you were given only the information you needed at each phase of your training, and there is a clear plan for more freedom once you are proving yourself to be successful.
- *Remember, without clarity a dog is not disobedient. He/she just guessed wrong because we failed to set them and show them what we wanted. Don't be the dog's biggest source of confusion.*
- Leash: consider using the same protocol we are practicing at the shelter. If you'd like to practice a different technique you are welcome to, just be sure to decide on something that your whole family can be consistent with.

Trigger stacking

Since we already know your new dog is struggling with these four layers being inflamed and therefore likely has a low tolerance for nonsense, let's talk about triggers you should avoid in the first few weeks or possibly months:

- Taking your dog to public places (pet stores, grooming shops, dog parks, friends' homes, etc.)
- Bathing or attempting to groom him/her
- Introducing too quickly to other pets or animals
- Handling the dog while eating or sleeping
- Attempting to take something from the dog (an item dropped accidentally or a toy in his/her possession)
- Immersing the dog too quickly in household chaos (allowing kids to handle the dog, having friends over, etc.)
- Trying to cuddle or touch the dog more than he/she is wanting

Remember, as you take this dog home right now you are nothing more to them than a kind stranger. Lowering his/her exposure to more triggers while relieving pressure from the layers of stress can make all the difference in your dog's transition period.

For more information/references see below:

Weber, R. (n.d.). *The Layered Stress Model*. Retrieved from Happy Dog Training:

<https://www.happydogtraining.info/general-information/the-layered-stress-model/>

See also trainer Jay Jack discuss the Layered Stress Model here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbqeXcEk8vM&feature=youtu.be>

For more information on trigger stacking:

<https://pawsandreward.com/trigger-stacking-your-dogs-threshold/>

<https://high5caninecoaching.wordpress.com/2018/03/08/are-you-trigger-stacking-your-dog/>