



~ The Importance of Decompression ~ Bringing Home your New Adopted Dog

You just adopted your dog, she is scared, sad, and riddled with anxiety, as a result of an awful and traumatic past.

Seeing this scared little soul, all you want to do is pick her up and shower her with all the love she deserves and has been missing! But what she actually needs in those first few days and weeks is space, a simple routine, and time to get to know and trust YOU on her own terms.

For many new adopters, this approach can seem counter-intuitive. After all, there's so much emphasis put on socializing new puppies and rescue dogs. But dog trainer and behavior consultant Mary Angilly, who works with high-risk rescue dogs, **believes EVERY new puppy or dog should have ample time to decompress when entering a new home.**

Every Dog is an Individual

For fearful dogs or those stressed in the shelter environment, it could take a week, a few weeks or maybe even months for them to start feeling comfortable. Robust puppies who have already started to be appropriately socialized, or even adult dogs that were very well socialized and taken care of their whole life, but were sadly surrendered by their owners due to unforeseen circumstances, might only take just a few days to get comfortable. ***They're all unique, of course, but it's unrealistic to expect ANY dog to walk in to their foster home instantly well-adjusted and impeccably behaved.***

Set Your Foster Dog up for Success and Take it Slowwww... It's tempting for us adults, but especially for excited kids, to try to hug and play with a new dog immediately, but, as Angilly explains, "*While adoptive parents might have the best intentions, new dogs have no idea where they are, who they're with, or what is happening, and it takes time to build a positive relationship.*"

She goes on to point out that, "The more patient the dog parent is, and the more choice a dog is given over seemingly simple things, the faster trust will build." This includes basic interactions,

like petting.

There are caveats, though, when it comes to decompression. For example, puppies have a critical sensitive socialization period from around 3 to 14 weeks of age. They're like little sponges, and the experiences they have during this time can greatly influence their future behavior. Gradual introductions to new people and stimuli are still important.

Stick to a Routine, A Schedule is VERY IMPORTANT!

Predictability is reassuring for dogs, particularly if they're nervous. "A routine and quiet atmosphere are essential when first taking a dog home, generally for at least a few weeks," explains Angilly. Even well-bred puppies will have gone through a major transition, leaving everything and everyone they've ever known.

This period could be even more unsettling for rescue dogs. "Some have come from multiple shelters, have had long transport rides, and have received necessary, but likely stressful, medical care and behavior evaluations," says Angilly. "This can understandably cause a great deal of stress for even the most well-adjusted dog."

A simple and consistent schedule can help prevent trigger stacking, which Angilly explains is "a harmful accumulation of stress from multiple stimuli that can result in difficulty coping and exaggerated stress responses." **Consider creating a routine for things like feeding times, toilet breaks, naps, training sessions, and playtime.**

How to Recognize the Signs of Stress

Understanding your newly adopted dog's body language, recognizing signs of stress, and listening to what they're trying to tell you are all key. You can prevent anxiety-inducing situations and work on building positive associations instead. Some common signs of stress include excessive panting, pacing, tucking the ears or tail, licking the lips, yawning, freezing, or crouching.

Growling is another common sign a dog is feeling uncomfortable or threatened. Most people often panic when this occurs and punish the behavior. But as Angilly points out, **this should be considered a positive thing because it's a dog's way of communicating and trying not to bite.**

"Punishing this behavior may create a dog that isn't only more worried about the foster parent or the trigger that caused them to growl, but one that doesn't give any warnings prior to biting," she explains.

Instead, give your adopted dog the space they need and try to establish why they're growling. Then, when appropriate, you can work on helping them to feel more relaxed.

Offer a Safe Space

Always provide a quiet space your adopted dog can choose to retreat to. Angilly refers to this as a 'Zen Zone', and this is different for every dog.

"Some dogs like enclosed spaces and crates, while others might prefer a spot under a table, or in a bedroom. It may take a few days or weeks for you to determine where their adoptive dog is most comfortable," says Angilly.

She emphasizes a golden rule: "Their safe space should be honored as a place they can always retreat to when they want to get away from family activity and not be bothered, and this includes petting."

Tips for Building a Strong Bond

As well as ensuring interactions are on your foster dog's terms and not forced, there are lots of other simple ways you can help them to feel relaxed around you.

Begin with simply spending quiet time in each other's company. When they're ready and looking for it, offer them affection, food rewards, and calm play sessions.

When it comes to training, start things off indoors and keep sessions short, fun, and, above all, positive. Using food, toys, and praise are great ways to build confidence, maintain motivation, and clearly reward desirable behaviors. .

Studies show that environmental enrichment can be an effective stress-reliever and confidence booster for dogs. Treat-dispensing toys and nosework activities are often particularly beneficial.

Once your adoptive dog is comfortable, getting out on slow, sniffy, quiet walks is also often a beneficial decompression tool. You can use a long line attached to a well-fitting harness to allow some freedom to explore.

Giving dogs more choices and a sense of "control" in their lives is one of the most important things we can do for their well-being, and this is especially true when supporting them through the decompression period.