

Understanding Your Dog's "Window of Tolerance"

The term "Window of Tolerance", coined by Dr Dan Siegel, refers to the optimal emotional/physiological "zone" for happy and healthy functioning. While Dr Seigel is involved in research and education for humans, this concept is directly applicable to any mammal - including our dogs!

We, and our dogs, are most comfortable within the optimal zone of the Window of Tolerance. Too much stress or arousal can lead out the top of the window into a "fight or flight" response, or out the bottom of the window into a "freeze/collapse" reaction.

While these reactions can occur in isolation, it's also very possible for a combination of reactions to occur. Fight and flight can show up in combination when a stranger enters the personal space of a fearful dog, (e.g. walking in the front door). The dog, adrenalized from the doorbell, might initially charge and bark at the stranger, but runs away as the stranger steps toward them. Maybe the dog proceeds to approach and retreat while barking, and finally scoot in for a bite on the bum as the person turns their back.

This dog is demonstrating both a fight response (charge/approach, bite) and a flight response (run away, avoiding the front of the person) in combination. In most behaviour cases, an experienced eye can pick out what type of nervous system activation there is at play and in what combination. Even more importantly, knowing when a dog prefers to flee but feels forced to fight is a huge advantage when assessing a dog and working through a behaviour plan! A dog who would rather avoid trouble is much easier to manage, but all too often, they are pushed into a fight response because their need for space isn't understood or heeded by their person.

Most of us can understand a dog who sees another dog and barks at it. But how a dog's behaviour escalates is a bit more complicated than that.

"Trigger stacking" is dog trainer lingo for what happens if a dog is exposed to multiple triggers over a period of time. For an example in human terms, let's say you encounter the following over the course of the day: You miss your alarm, drop your toothbrush in the toilet, are late for work, mess up on a big presentation, get scolded by your boss, have to stay late, get stuck in traffic on your way home, finally get in and... there is a sink full of dishes, and your partner is relaxing on the couch seemingly without a care in the world! You may have managed to hold things together during the day, but those dirty dishes are the straw that broke the camel's back. Suddenly it all hits you and you whizz out the top of your Window of Tolerance and snap at your partner!

Earlier in the day, you may have felt the stress building, but that may not have been evident to those around you - until you snap, that is! That is the reality for our dogs, as well. Body language and communication are subtle, and it's easy for most owners to overlook these "whispers" of communication and only tune in when the dog is "shouting."

A sneeze isn't something that would usually trigger any reaction in Monty the German Shepherd, but last week someone sneezed in their garden, and he nearly leapt into my arms like a terrified cartoon character. So why did he react that way?

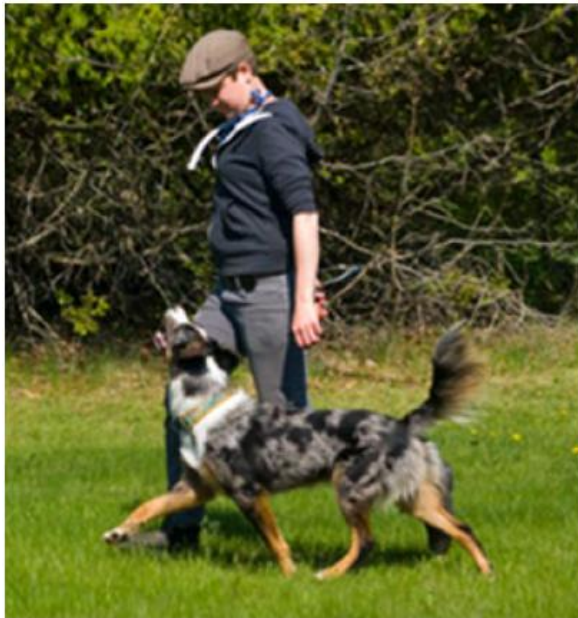
Monty is reactive to dogs but is generally comfortable with other things in the environment while out on a walk - however once he is triggered, he has a difficult time coming back into his Window of Tolerance. It is something that we are extremely mindful of when navigating walks and training sessions.

On his walk last week, Monty was surprised by a dog at a too-close distance, and he had a huge loud bark-and-lunge reaction (fight). We got him out of there as quickly as possible, and he was keen to escape (flight) as soon as he realized the option was available to him. Monty visibly settled down quickly with a big shake off and a roll in the grass and proceeded down the sidewalk at a slow amble. Five minutes later, someone in their garden across the street sneezed, and Monty nearly jumped out of his skin! Monty is not worried about people or noises, so what happened?

This is a prime example of trigger stacking in a dog. If an observer was to see Monty only in that moment, they might conclude that Monty is afraid of sounds, or afraid of the person. Knowing the full context of that reaction informs how it might be interpreted. One element of a trigger is how it appears in the environment. A sudden change, even if by a usually innocuous trigger like a sneeze, can itself be a part of the triggering picture.

Monty outwardly looked "fine" before this reaction, as if he was within his Window of Tolerance, but it was the effect of trigger stacking from the initial reaction that resulted in his nervous system remaining activated enough to be triggered by the sneeze. In fact, he was not actually feeling fine at all! We can see body language and behaviour, but we can't always know a dog's internal state. Understanding trigger stacking allows owners to see this outwardly "fine" appearance and know that their dog may not truly be fine at that moment - the dog's internal state may be outside of their Window of Tolerance, even if they are not visibly in fight/flight.

These reactions and internal states aren't something that can be consciously controlled, though luckily that doesn't mean that there's nothing that can be done about stress and the associated reactions! This topic is especially important to delve into if you share your life with a dog with big feelings. These are dogs who need the most support to be able to move out of their fight/flight/freeze stress reactions and back into their Window of Tolerance. Not only that, but the right supports can, in fact, widen that Window of Tolerance, so these reactions don't remain the default response to what triggers them. Reach out to positive reinforcement behaviour consultants in your area (and beyond, as many behaviour consultants offer very effective virtual consults), and be ready to learn how to best support your dog.



Emily Fisher is a Certified Dog Behaviour Consultant through the International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants (IAABC), and a Certified Professional Dog Trainer through the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (CCPDT).