

How to walk your dog when you can't walk your dog

Most people take for granted walking their dog. How hard can it be? Snap on a leash and walk out the door. But if you have a reactive or fearful dog, you'll know it's not that easy. With triggers lurking around every corner — like other dogs, people or whatever else your dog reacts to — your dog can get easily scared or agitated and not calm back down until you get home. Not only is this not a nice walk for you, it's also not enjoyable for your dog.

Seeking out the assistance of a qualified behavioural consultant is critical to help you navigate this problem. Preventing overwhelm is a major part of helping your dog learn to cope in the face of triggers. And exposure alone can sometimes result in increased behavioural problems, rather than your dog “getting used to it.”

This article doesn't tackle the how-to of training a reactive or fearful dog, but instead focuses on how to walk your dog when it feels like an impossible task. The strategies below are general suggestions and may not be appropriate for all dogs nor possible in all living situations. In addition, due to differences in vehicle and pedestrian traffic, the time of day could make a difference as to how accessible these locations are for a reactive or fearful dog. Think about your dog's needs and discuss the best options with your trainer.

Cemetery

Pros

- Excellent visibility.
- Lots of escape routes to avoid oncoming triggers.
- Visual blocks to prevent your dog from seeing triggers.
- Other dogs tend to be on leash in cemeteries out of respect for the grave sites.

Cons

- Some cemeteries are popular dog walking sites especially if they are within city limits.
- Your dog will be largely confined to the path.
- Potential wildlife in heavily treed or more rural cemeteries.

Industrial area or business park

Pros

- Excellent visibility.
- Lots of escape routes and room to move in many directions.

- Plowed parking lots for winter walks.
- Wide lawns/fields may allow for the use of a long line for more freedom of movement.

Cons

- Wildlife may be present in more naturalized areas.
- Trucks or other large machinery.
- Potential for scary, unfamiliar noises.

Big box store parking lot — far end or behind the building

Pros

- Excellent visibility.
- Lots of escape routes.
- People exiting their cars will likely travel a predictable path to the store entrance.
- Potential for training with relatively predictable triggers at a distance.
- Plowed parking lots for winter walks.

Cons

- Potentially unpredictable vehicle traffic.
- People leaving the store may not be predictable in where they're going.
- Time of day and day of week will create variability in activity in this location.
- Limited opportunities for sniffing and exploration on concrete.

Horse barn indoor arena rental

Pros

- Secure location allows your dog to run off leash.
- Protected from the elements.
- No snow/ice during winter use.
- Lots of interesting smells.
- Excellent footing for running hard.

Cons

- Horse poop may be accessible to eat.
- You may have to walk through the barn/past horses to access the arena.
- There may be loose farm dogs/cats on site.
- Gates/fencing may not be secure. Verify security before letting your dog off leash.

Long straight trail (e.g. rail trail)

Pros

- Excellent visibility straight ahead and behind.
- Ideal location to use a long line.

Cons

- Bikes/snowmobiles are common.
- Escape routes may be limited.
- Other dogs may be off leash.

Open fields in non-urban areas

Pros

- Excellent visibility.
- Ideal location to use a long line.

Cons

- You may not know if the field is used as an informal off-leash dog park.
- High risk of off-leash dogs especially if the field is in or near an urban area.

Country road

Pros

- Excellent visibility.
- Low likelihood of seeing triggers if you select the location carefully.

Cons

- Local dogs may leave their properties. Pick a section of road without houses to reduce the risk.
- Vehicle traffic.
- Parking on snow-covered roads can be difficult.

Private park rentals and sniff spots*

*Sniffspot is an app where you can rent private park space/yards.

Pros

- Potentially fully fenced for off-leash play.
- Predictable and private location.
- Private trails for long-line use.
- Some rentals include equipment like tunnels.

Cons

- Cost per use.
- Careful screening of new locations is required.

Neighbourhood streets

For some dogs, walking on neighbourhood streets isn't completely out of the question, but might need to be approached carefully. It's important to pay close attention to the considerations below.

Time of day and weather

Typical after work and before/after school times are the worst times to walk on street. If you're a night owl or early riser, walk your dog during extreme off hours. Nice weather brings out more people and dogs, so walking in unpleasant weather is preferable to limit triggers.

No busy streets

You always need an escape route when walking in the neighbourhood. Avoid busy streets that prevent you from being able to cross quickly and avoid approaching triggers.

Boulevards, wide streets and parked cars

These three elements provide distance from triggers and allow you to tuck your dog out of sight when passing a dog on the other side is inevitable. Narrow streets without space to maneuver is more difficult, especially if there are no cars to limit the visibility of triggers across the street.

Be alert, spot hazards and cross the street early

Stay alert to your surroundings and keep track of potential hazards like blind corners and opening doors. When a trigger is approaching, cross the street early to avoid provoking a reaction from your dog.

Escape routes

As you walk, take note of potential escape routes. This could involve going up a driveway, tucking behind a car or large community mailbox, taking note of side streets or alleyways and keeping track of what's behind you. Remember you can always turn around and back-track when there's a trigger ahead. Most people don't think of this in the moment and it's a helpful tactic to practise routinely.

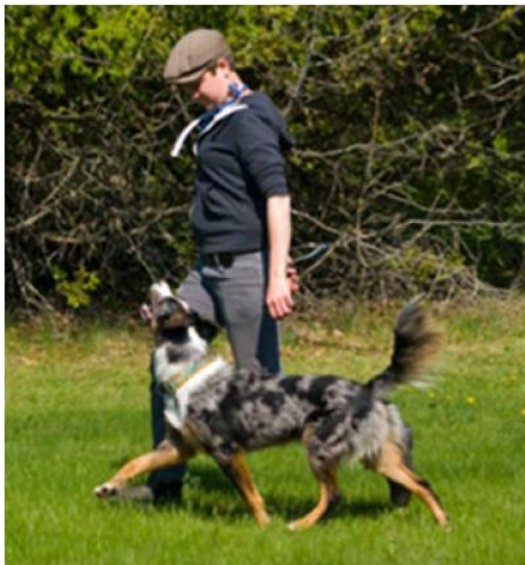
Bring a friend

A second person means an extra set of eyes to watch for triggers, check blind corners, run interference with your too-friendly neighbour and even carry a leash to catch a loose dog.

Go somewhere else

If your neighbour leaves their dog loose or you live somewhere with tiny streets and endless triggers, consider driving to a neighbourhood that can provide a more relaxed walk. It's not a bad idea to scout out a new walking spot in advance and bring a second person for a handful of walks until the location becomes familiar.

Just like in humans, constant stress wears down a dog and eats away at their resilience. While training with triggers is important, it's equally important to give yourself and your dog restorative and enjoyable walks. These walks can help you both decompress and benefit more fully from the training you do with triggers present.



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).