



Look at That (LAT)

As you raise and train your dog, you may often come across stimuli that creates reactivity, anxiety or simply causes them to become over stimulated. Stimuli like other dogs, people/kids, bikes, squirrels and so much more can create these strong emotions in your dog. The point of the LAT technique is to help you desensitize your dog to these stimuli by helping them build calm, positive associations with them.

First and foremost, you must be aware of your dog's threshold. Threshold refers to the limitations of a dog's emotional state and its impact on their mental state. A dog that is under threshold is using what is referred to as the 'thinking brain' meaning they are capable of rationalizing, problem solving and making proactive choices. A dog that is over threshold is using their 'emotional brain', also known as the 'flight/fight/freeze' reflex. They are unable to rationalize or make proactive choices, they only react.

- If a dog is calm and relaxed, they are under threshold.
- If they start staring at a stimulus or are struggling to pay attention, they are at the limit of their threshold.
- If they start barking, whining, or pulling at the stimulus or simply cannot be deterred from it, they are over threshold.

It's important to remember learning can only occur while your dog is under threshold and you must take care to never adopt a 'just deal with it and get over it' mentality. Odds are your dog will never just get over it and repeated exposure to an over-the-top stimulus can contribute to making your dog more reactive and make your training more difficult.

Second, you must constantly be aware of your environmental management. LAT requires a great deal of environmental management to be successful as it allows you to keep your dog under threshold while you are working with them. Keep in mind that the environment is incredibly unpredictable and fluid so you must be ready to proactively adapt by moving closer/farther away, changing directions, or even ending the exercise on a moment's notice. Teaching your dog an emergency U-turn is a great tool to make it easier to move your dog away smoothly and safely from a stimulus. The theme of LAT is 'slow and steady wins the race' and it's all about creating a lot of successive 'easy' wins.

Once you have determined your dog is under threshold and you think that you are in an environment that will foster success, you can begin the actual LAT exercise. The first step is to wait for your dog to acknowledge the stimulus i.e. a dog. The moment your dog looks at the other dog you are going to mark and reward. You will do this several times in a row to help your dog create a positive association – a dog being present means good things are going to happen.

The second step is for your dog to acknowledge the stimulus before deciding that looking at you is more valuable. So, your dog would look at the other dog and then look back to you. It is important that this step is entirely your dog's choice and not because of a leave it cue, no reward marker or cueing a look. You want your dog to decide for themselves that not only are you more important than the stimulus but also that the stimulus is no longer a big concern for them. Using Leave It simply tells your dog not to react to the stimulation but does not help them to feel more comfortable or calm when the stimulus is



in the environment. This is more work for you as you would constantly need to be cueing Leave it and it can push your dog into a state of learned helplessness where they are so overwhelmed they just shut down.

To proceed from here, you need to make sure your dog is relaxed and confident at the initial distance before moving closer and starting all over again. While this may seem like going at a snail's pace, you do not get to decide what is too easy or too hard for your dog. You can only progress at your dog's pace. If you had a rough falling out with someone and had to be in the same room as them, you would have difficulty ignoring them. Someone pointing out 'but they are all the way across the room!' isn't going to make you feel better – space, time and choice make you feel better. You need to do your best to give your dog all three when they need them. Your job is to make your dog's comfort zone bigger and stop the reason for the reaction not just the reaction itself.

Watch for signs of stress in your dog, and if you see them, you need to move farther from the stimulus or end the training session. Some signs of stress to watch for include:

- Yawning
- Lip licking
- Whining
- Barking
- Staring
- Grabbing or pinching your fingers when taking treats

LAT, when done properly, can help your dog stop reacting to a stimulus, can change your dog's emotional response to a stimulus and make training a more positive and fun experience for you and your dog.