„Stress triangle" in practice - calming a reactive dog in presence of other dogs

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The stress triangle (completely explained during my workshops) is a method to prevent your dog from "flipping out" to conditions of aggression or fear in which he does not listen to the handler any more but only attacks or flees instinctively. Although it seems complicated, it is a quite simple logic that can be summarized as follows: The rise of stress hormones in the body increase the performance up to certain level (called eustress), but further rising will reduce the performance and may even end by death (this descending stage is called distress). Eustress includes also a short stage in which the performance still keeps increasing, but the actions are not controllable by will any more - that is exactly the stage in which the dog does nothing but attack or flee, regardless from the handler's commands. To be able to explain something to the animal, we must not exceed this invisible threshold called FFF (Flight or Fight or Freeze). But the only one who knows where the dog is situated on its "stress curve" is just the dog. Therefore the dog must get the opportunity to control its stress level by itself. We must provide it with answers to 4 questions:
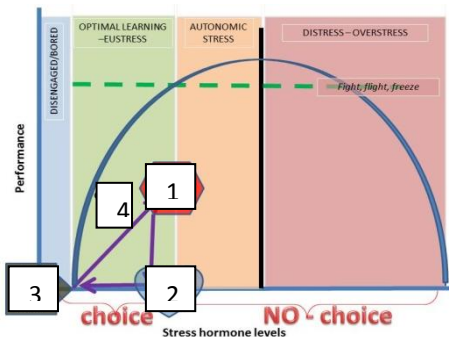

1) How can I stop the stress situation (STOP)?
2) Where can I relax (where do I have a SAFE PLACE)?
3) How can I restart the training after calming down (START)?
4) WHY should I want it actually? What reward will I get for it?
Thanks to it, the dog's inner condition will always be under the FFF threshold, we will be able to communicate with it efficiently and to accustom it to what had stressed it.


Example: Many dogs are aggressive only on the leash, while when running freely, they rather retreat. That's because when they are free, they are able to work with distance from other dogs by their own will (i.e. they can answer the STOP and SAFE PLACE questions by themselves), while the leash does not allow it to them. An aggressive lunge against other dogs is actually their own answer to STOP, and by keeping the other dogs at bay, they answer the question of SAFE PLACE. If we want to change the situation, we must offer them another opportunity to answer, and add also START and WHY.

Step 0 - The dog knows the clicker from before, and is able to work for rewards when in piece. If we still don't have well working rewards and bridge (signal to mark the rewarded action), we first must build them for the dog. Only then, the following procedure will work.
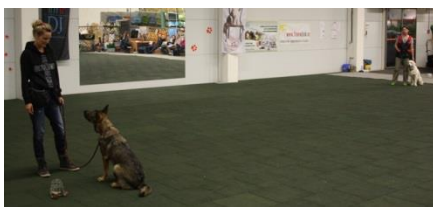

Step 1 - The handler with a reactive dog is alone in the area; the next pair is sufficiently far for the reactive dog to be able to eat the rewards. The handler marks with clicking the position selected in advance, in which the dog looks at the handler, and rewards it. The dog then goes to that position alone, voluntarily and without command (by capturing). After several repetitions, the dog is constantly in that position. So we can assume that it is sufficiently relaxed for START.
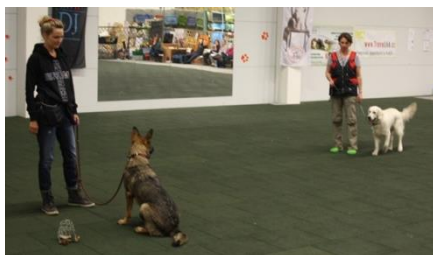
Step 2 - At the handler's stimulus, the other pair starts walking forward. In the moment the reactive dog looks at them, they stop. The look at them becomes the answer to STOP.

Step 3 - The reactive dog has stopped the stress stimulus, he does not have reason to attack, and returns its look back to the handler. He is rewarded by
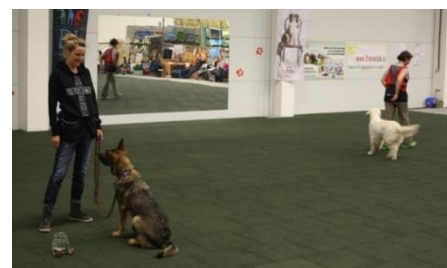
a treat for it, and at the same moment, the other pair moves away - the distance is increased (i.e. the stress stimulus is decreased). With further repetitions, the place next to the handler becomes the dog's SAFE PLACE. The other pair approaches only at the impulse of the reactive dog's handler, at the moment when the reactive dog looks at him (we understand looking at the handler as START).

Step 4 - After several repetitions, the reactive dog usually stops staring at the other pair, but only makes a short look there and back - he does not need to stop them so urgently any more. From that moment on, the other pair stops upon the look, but does not move back, and upon the impulse of the reactive dog's handler, they continue from the same spot. For the time being, they rather don't go behind the reactive dog's back, but walk only in his field of view. After some time, it is usually obvious that they don't need to stop, and they only just walk, and the reactive dog gets rewards for it.

Step 5 - The principle is transferred to movement. At the impulse of the reactive dog's handler, both pairs start walking against each other, and if the reactive dog looks at the other pair, both pairs stop and the reactive dog is rewarded for looking back by a treat and by increasing the distance of the other pair (giving them a wide berth). After several repetitions, stopping is not necessary any more, and the pairs only just meet, while the reactive dog gets rewards.

Step 6 - Change of the helper pair for another. The new pair must go "several steps back" in the exercise. The estimate depends on the reactive dog's handler - we usually start by steps 2-4 of these instructions, but the progress is faster, and we are in step 5 with the new dog quite soon.

Question 1: What to do if the reactive dog lunges to attack? - Then the other pair just stops, and the handler holds the reactive dog on leash. If the reactive dog comes back without being called, he should not be rewarded immediately (so that it cannot establish a link with the attack), but after several seconds, he gets a command for something else, and is rewarded for it. We know for the next attempt that the pairs were too close to each other (the stressor was too big), and so we must go "a bit back" in the exercise.

Question 2: When is the reactive dog prepared for the reality of the street? - Fast desensitization for the other dog still does not mean that the training will bring results in everyday reality with foreign dogs. You will be prepared for the street only when the reactive dog manages other dogs in training without the preparatory stage, i.e. straight away the mutual passing in walking, if possible in different environments. In reality, we also must notice and reward situations the dog has solved well, and not only correct mistakes - the rules from the training centre are binding also to the handler, not only to the dog in the reality.

Question 3: When can the training go wrong? - If you have not a well working reward. If you reward aggression, or if you reward too soon after aggression, respectively. If you coordinate wrongly, and the other pair does not manage to stop at the dog's look. If you rush the training, and the reactive dog is more corrected for attacks then rewarded for calm reaction. If the helper is also a reactive dog who will attack. If the aggression is not caused by fear but by defence of resource. If the reactive dog does not have time to calm down between individual attempts. If the trained reactive dog is not able to turn his head away from the handler, and lets the other pair approach too much, and then attacks straight away... there are many opportunities of mistakes, and there are many variants of this training (sometimes you must reward the look at the other dog and not the look away; other times you must reward by a toy in direction away from the other dog, etc.). You also must not forget socialization.

If you want to know more, COME TO THE TRAINING CENTRE or to some WORKSHOP. I will be looking forward to see you!

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