RELAXATION PROGRAM

Just Chill

Would you like your dog to relax and just “hang out”?
If your dog has trouble settling during the day, this program is for you. It was developed for my own dog, who couldn’t settle in the house and followed me everywhere.
To achieve the goal of relaxation, it’s crucial to adopt a mindful approach to your own behaviour. By being calm and confident yourself, you will set the tone for successful sessions. Speak softly, move gently, and radiate calmness to reassure your dog and create a positive learning environment.
Before asking our dog to relax however, we need to make sure their needs have been met. Always ask yourself if your dog had adequate physical exercise and mental stimulation. Wait 10 – 15 minutes after coming back home from a walk before attempting a relaxation session.

What you’ll need:

- Mats or towels
- Dog bed or crate
- Treats of different value
- A calm release cue
- Remote feeder (this is a valuable device to be able to reinforce relaxed behaviour from a distance without your dog expecting a cookie coming when they hear your movements). Please make sure to watch your dog when using the remote feeder, some dogs can become a bit obsessive with the feeder, and it might have the opposite effect to calmness.
- Video camera or mirror

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Here are a few of my favourites for a remote feeder and dog mats -

Trixie Dog Activity Memory Trainer

PetSafe Treat & Train

Pet Tutor Mini

Dirty Dog Door Mat

Before you start

Before you embark on the journey of relaxation for your dog, here are a few points to consider/prepare.

- Observe your dog's preferred resting spots within your home and strategically place mats or towels in these areas. This simple step facilitates the process of capturing desired behaviours by providing familiar and comfortable locations for your dog.

- Invest in a quality dog bed or crate to offer your pet a designated sanctuary where they can seek refuge and relaxation. Properly introducing your dog to and creating value through classical conditioning for their bed or crate helps instil a sense of security and promotes positive associations. When your dog seeks this space, it is important that they are not going to be disturbed.

- Select treats of varying value to tailor the outcome of your sessions. Higher-value treats serve as powerful incentives for creating value into the mat/towel/bed, while lower-value treats maintain engagement for resetting your dog.

- Introduce a calm release cue to signal to your dog that they are free to move about. Consistency and repetition are key to reinforcing this cue, helping your dog understand when it is appropriate to transition from relaxation mode to engagement mode.

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- Incorporate a remote feeder into your sessions to dispense treats form a distance, allowing for precise reinforcement and effective redirection of attention without being physically with them.

By integrating these elements into this program and maintaining a calm behaviour, you can help your dog to relax and achieve lasting success in their development. Remember, patience and consistency are the keys of effective training, so approach each session with positivity and perseverance.

Step by step guide

1. Condition the mat or towel as a trigger for your dog it is chill time

At the beginning of the program, we want to condition the mat/towel (target) to give it some value to our dog. Since the value for the target will increase naturally throughout the program, we can keep these initial sessions short and sweet.

- Select a spot: Identify a spot in your home where your dog typically likes to hang out or relax.
- Introduce the mat: Place the mat or towel in the chosen spot, making sure it's comfortable and inviting for your dog.
- Encourage interaction: Invite your dog to approach the mat using a verbal cue or hand gesture.
- Reward placement: As soon as your dog steps onto the mat, reward them with a treat by dropping it on the mat. This creates value for being on the mat and creates a positive association.
- Limit repetitions: Keep the initial session short and sweet. Aim for just a few repetitions at a time.
- Introduce calm release: After a few successful repetitions, introduce your calm release cue. Say your cue and gently throw a treat a short distance away from

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the mat to encourage them off.

- Short session: only do a few repetitions of this, about 10 - 15 reinforcements (5 – 8 repetitions). See this thing, get a reinforcement.

- Store the mat: Put the mat away after each session

2. *Capture the behaviour*

Once we have put some value into the target, we can start capturing the behaviour that we like to reinforce – a relaxed state. Follow these steps to set yourself and your dog up.

- Prepare the environment: Have a few mats/towels lying around in your house. You can also place one on or in your dog's bed/crate. Make sure to have some food bowls filled with treats scattered around the house. If your dog is a counter surfer, carry the treats on you or have them in a container your dog can't open or chew.

- Capturing: Whenever you notice your dog lounging or resting on one of their designated mats, calmly drop a treat onto the mat without drawing too much attention to yourself. It's essential to maintain a relaxed manner to avoid interrupting the calm behaviour.

- Reinforce & Release: When your dog settles onto the mat in their bed or crate, give them a few reinforcements. Use your calm release word to encourage them out of their bed/crate. Stroke them very calm and gentle and give them a lower value treat when coming off the bed/out of crate. Depending on your dog, you might not need to give them any reward for coming off/out and only reinforce every other coming off/out. The value should be with the mat.

- Troubleshooting: If your dog starts to anticipate the treat coming and tries to get out of bed/crate when they see you reaching for that treat, put the treat back into your pocket. Only give them the treat when they are in their bed/crate on the target. The idea is that reinforcement comes to them, we don't want them to come for it.

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- Capture comfortable position: Aim to capture the moment when your dog is lying in their most comfortable position, such as on their side. We want to condition relaxation in that specific posture.

- Consistency and Patience: Repeat these steps consistently over time, being patient with your dog's progress. Remember, the key is to create positive associations with the mat/towel as a relaxation spot. Some dogs need more help than others.

3. Slowly take yourself out of the picture

The end goal is that our dogs can self-regulate and relax, even when we are not there or when we move around. True relaxation is possible, even when the environment around our dogs might be a bit busy.

- Build on: Once your dog is comfortable with going onto their designated relaxation spot (the target) and relax, reward them for being there.

- Start movement: Begin by taking a few steps away from the dog while they remain on the target. If they stay relaxed, return to them, and offer a treat.

- Troubleshoot: If the head comes up or they become alert when you move, just praise them, give them some gentle strokes, and wait for the body go into relaxation again. Make your next steps smaller.

- Repeat sessions: Do a few sessions of this exercise, ensuring your dog remains relaxed even as you move around. The goal is for them to maintain a relaxed position on the target, regardless of your movements.

- Test leaving the room: Once your dog consistently remains relaxed when you move around, try leaving the room briefly. Return and reward them if they remain calm and relaxed on the target.

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- Troubleshoot: If your dog gets up when you leave the room, break the steps down again to a distance that they are comfortable with and stay in that relaxed state.

4. Bring the remote feeder in

By following these steps and incorporating a remote feeder into the relaxation program, you can gradually fade yourself out of the picture while teaching your dog to relax independently in their designated relaxation area.

- Introduce the remote feeder: If your dog is not familiar with a remote feeder, introduce it gradually and ensure they are comfortable with the sound of the motor. Condition (create a positive association) the remote feeder first before you incorporate it into the relaxation program.

- Set up the environment: Place the target mat and the remote feeder next to each other in the designated relaxation area.

- Manage excitement: If your dog becomes overly excited or hyped up because of the remote feeder, withhold feeding until they show signs of relaxation, such as lying down or not paying attention to the feeder.

    - This step can take some time with dogs who are very food motivated
    - Take your time with this step and break it down for your dog to understand that reinforcement is only coming when they ignore the feeder

- Progress slowly: Take small, gradual steps when introducing the feeder into the program. Monitor your dog's reactions closely and proceed at their pace.

- Encourage Relaxation: As your dog becomes accustomed to the presence of the remote feeder, reinforce relaxed behaviour by using the feeder intermittently. Only provide treats from the feeder when your dog is in a calm and relaxed state.

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- Test leaving the room: Once your dog is comfortable relaxing next to the feeder, gradually increase the distance between yourself and your dog. You can leave the room briefly while observing your dog's behaviour through a camera or a mirror.

- If they remain relaxed when you leave the room, activate the feeder to provide the treats. This reinforces the behaviour of staying calm and relaxed even when alone.

- Troubleshooting: If you see that your dog is leaving their spot or they are not relaxed when you leave, go back a few steps, and increase distance while still in sight of your dog.

- Fade out the Feeder: Over time, reduce the frequency of using the remote feeder, gradually fading it out of the program. Your dog should learn to associate the presence of the target with relaxation, even without the feeder.

- Cue for Relaxation: Eventually, your dog will recognise the target as a cue to relax, independent of the presence of the feeder. This signifies success in teaching your dog to self-soothe and relax.

5. Always go at your dog's pace

To achieve yours and your dog's goal it is advised to go at their pace. No one will be relaxed if pushed or rushed. Be patient and trust the process. Be clear and consistent, each dog is an individual and learning doesn't happen in a linear progression.

- Be patient and calm
- Make sure that you see a true relaxation before you move on to the next step
- Be aware of how relaxation looks for your dog and only reinforce that
- Use this program as a daily quicky. Sessions don't need to be long, especially in the beginning stages

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6. Take the mat outside

Once your dog has great associations with their mat and can relax in your house, you can start taking the mat with you outside.

- Start in a low distracting environment and lower your criteria e.g. depending on your dog you might need to start at the beginning by rewarding your dog for just being on the mat and release
- At your dog's pace, build up to the relaxation behaviour
- Gradually introduce more distractions and remember to lower your criteria e.g. if you are at a café, don't expect your dog to stay on the mat for 10 minutes straight like they would when you are sitting at a park bench with hardly anybody around
    - Keep your rate of reinforcement high when increasing distractions to remind your dog what you would like them to do
    - Watch for a truly relaxed dog and casually drop a cookie onto their mat
    - Don't be discouraged if you need to start at the beginning when going to a busy place. However, the association of the mat will give your dog a cue that this is their spot.

Summary

It is crucial to understand that a dog cannot be both anxious and relaxed simultaneously. There are various types of relaxation techniques, including massage, TTouch and conditioned relaxation, all aiming for a state of co-relaxation.

Active relaxation involves operant conditioning, where the dog learns to relax independently. This approach draws inspiration from protocols developed by experts like Dr. Karen Overall and Suzanne Clothier.

Through shaping, dogs are guided to progressively adopt more relaxed body positions, characterised by relaxed breathing and soft eyes. It's essential to recognise how your dog appears when relaxed, as individual criteria vary.

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If you are using a marker, opt for a calming word or voice instead of a clicker. Use low-value treats if the dog is overly excited about food, such as crumbly cookies that can be broken down for sniffing. Maintain a high reinforcement rate during relaxation sessions, which should be longer to create a calm and boring environment, aiding the dog in the settling.

Pay attention to subtle body language cues, indication relaxation, such as slower movements, reduced panting, slower tail wagging, or assuming a lying-down position with less fidgeting.

My advice is to avoid introducing cues during relaxation sessions (besides the calm release cue) to prevent confusion. Maintain a low-key demeanour yourself, refraining from staring at your dog. Reward the dog when they're looking away from you or have their eyes half closed while lying down.

Utilise every opportunity, including outdoor settings, to practice relaxation. Once the dog has learned the basics, vary between relaxation and active engagement to reinforce their ability to settle in any situation. Take your mat/towel with you on the road, this will give your dog the cue they need.

Ultimately, the goal is for the dog to develop the capability to settle independently in various environments, promoting overall well-being and behavioural stability.

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