RESOURCES

⚡Arousal in dog training

You've probably been in this situation before: You want to teach your dog a new trick, but they just look at you, yawn and seem unmotivated. Or, the next time, they are going crazy, pupils dilated, and unable to focus.

Just like humans, dogs can experience too little or too much arousal. We call this being under- or over-aroused. However, for all beings, there's an ideal arousal state where the senses are tuned, focus is sharp, and the brain is primed for learning.

If you find yourself with the first dog, there are ways to adjust their arousal. First, ask yourself if it's the best time to train. Keep in mind that dogs are crepuscular (most active at dawn and dusk). Are you trying to motivate your dog during their pre-meal snooze or right after they've been lounging in the sun? Not all dogs are the same, of course – dogs are incredibly adaptable to our schedules. For example, my dog is very active in the morning and again in the early afternoon, but come lunchtime or dinner, she's off napping somewhere.

Second, to motivate your dog, you can elevate their arousal by changing their physiology. Play an engaging game of tug or have them chase you. Not only is it super fun and shifts their focus onto you, but it also gets their heart rate up and their blood pumping, helping to increase their arousal level.

If you find yourself with an over-aroused dog, try slower movements, scatter feeding in a grassy area, and using a calm, low voice to help lower their heart rate. Asking for stationary behaviours, such as focus exercises like a hand target or down-stay, can also help bringing their arousal level down. Additionally, using lower value reinforcers also helps these dogs to settle.

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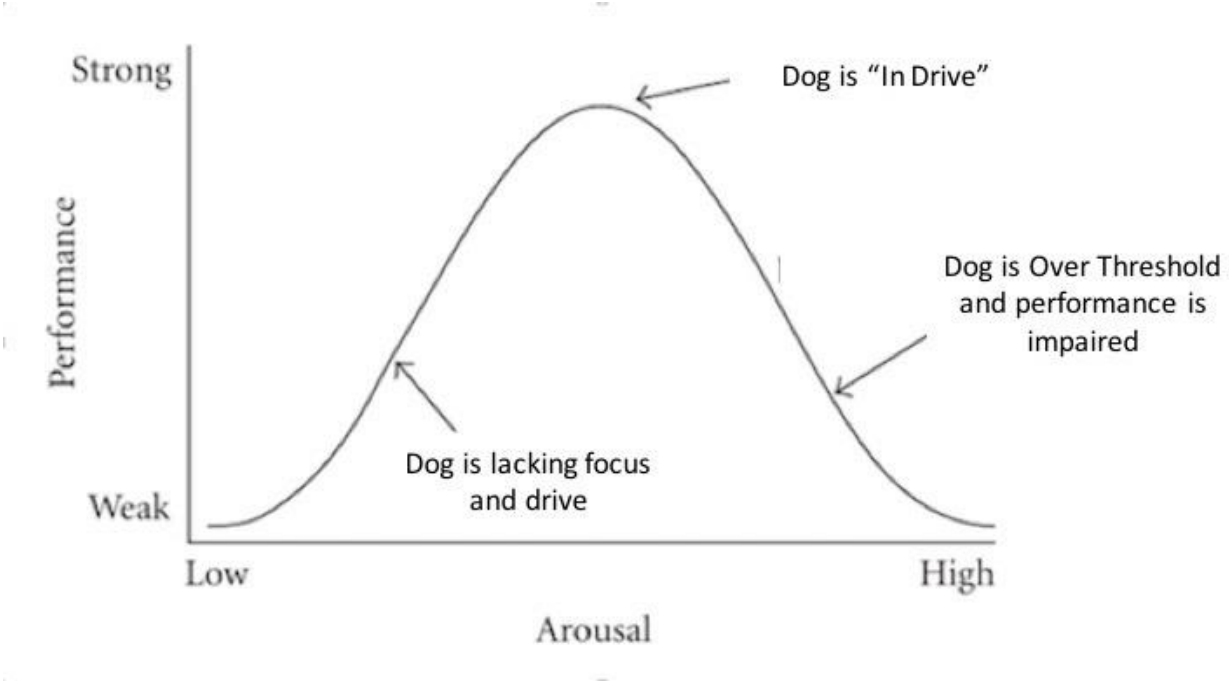
The relationship between performance and arousal in animals (and humans) is often illustrated with a cure, as shown in the picture below. The curve shows, that there is an ideal state of arousal for each individual. In this perfect state, the dog is “in drive”, able to focus on the task, and performs at their peak. If their arousal is too low or too high, they may lack motivation and focus, or they might be over-excited (over the threshold) and unable to concentrate.

Understanding your dog’s ideal arousal state – and recognise the behaviours they exhibit when under- or over-aroused – will help you train more efficiently.



Source: Yerkes-Dodson-Law curve https://scentsabilitiesnw.com/blog/high-arousal-dogs-and-focus/

Your Dog’s T.E.M.P – Tail, Eyes/Ears, Mouth, Posture

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