



Across a Threshold

Does your dog sometimes “lose it” or shut down? Understanding his “thresholds” will help you teach him to stay calm and happy.

The term “threshold” is often tossed around by dog behavior experts when they talk about working through a canine behavior issue. When you work with your dog on, for example, reactivity with other dogs or fear of children, the usual recommendation is to work with the dog “under threshold.”

The concept is most often used in relationship to canine aggression, fear, and reactivity. But understanding a behavior “threshold” is helpful for everyday training and learning situations, too. It can be a key element when socializing puppies or young dogs, instrumental in teaching excitable dogs to be calm, and essential for insecure dogs to find confidence.

What exactly is a threshold? Consider the threshold of a front door. When you cross a threshold, you move from one space to another. A behavior threshold is a similar concept; it’s when your dog crosses from one emotional state to another. If you spend time with a dog who is concerned about other dogs, you have probably witnessed the moment when he or she moves from seemingly okay into out-of-control behavior. That is going over threshold.

Here are five things that everyone can benefit from knowing about thresholds.

1. It’s not always about barking and lunging. When talking about “going over threshold,” most people picture a dog that suddenly becomes reactive: barking, lunging, and snarling. But there are many other expressions of being over threshold. Some include:

- ✓ Shutting down or freezing.
- ✓ Being overexcited (for example jumping or mouthing).
- ✓ Being distracted to the point of no connection.
- ✓ Doing “zoomies” (zipping around crazily).

When you are with your dog, you may notice when your dog stops taking treats, stops playing, or suddenly is calmer than usual. These may be a signal that your dog is approaching a threshold, or has even already moved from a comfortable emotional state into an uncomfortable state.

2. Over threshold is more than behaving badly. When a dog is over threshold it generally means that the dog is behaving in a way that we don’t like. More importantly, it means the dog is in a state of distress.

When a dog crosses an emotional threshold, certain physiological and psychological effects begin to take place. The dog may breathe more heavily and his heart rate may increase. A dog who is over threshold is *reacting* rather than thinking; he is in a fight, flight, freeze, or fool-around state. He may not be able to listen to you (or even hear you). In addition, when a dog is over threshold, you cannot *teach* him to behave differently. A dog will not be able to learn until he back under threshold.

3. Thresholds change constantly! Unlike the threshold of your front door, an emotional or behavior threshold doesn't stay in the same place; it can change from minute to minute and from one situation to the next.

The setting for a dog's threshold at a particular moment depends on a variety of criteria. For example, take a dog I will call River. He is a little insecure in new places, does not particularly like other dogs, and he becomes very excited by movement. Alone, none of these are a problem for River. He may be nervous in new places, but generally, he just gets a little extra sniffy. He's not happy about other dogs, but will usually tolerate them. He gets excited when a bicycle goes by, but can still listen when called away.

But if all of these things happen at once – walking in a new place, several bikes speed by very close, and a young dog suddenly intrudes on his space – it's too much for River to handle. The combination may cause him to go over threshold and snarl at the young dog.

Some of the things that can affect threshold are:

- ✓ **The number of triggers** (the more, the bigger the risk). As in the example above, a lot of small triggers at the same time pushed River over threshold. Note: A trigger is not always something your dog is nervous about or afraid of; a trigger can be anything that increases your dog's arousal or excitement. For example, rowdy play can cause some dogs to go over threshold!
- ✓ **Proximity** or how close a dog is to the trigger. In most cases, closer is more difficult. But with some dogs, something farther away can actually be more difficult. For example, something farther away may be less identifiable (and so more scary).
- ✓ **Frequency** (how often the trigger happens). If a dog faces the same trigger repeatedly, especially in a short period, he may react more strongly.
- ✓ **The intensity of the trigger.** For example, if the trigger is a sound, how loud it is or how long it lasts might affect the dog's reaction.
- ✓ **Being hungry, thirsty, tired, or in pain,** can all impact a dog's threshold.
- ✓ **Accumulated stress** can also affect a dog's threshold. For example, if your dog has a fun but stressful weekend at an agility trial, he may go over threshold more quickly if spooked by a loud sound on Monday morning. (It may take several days for his stress hormones to return to normal, so accumulated stress responses are not always easy to trace.)

4. You can help your dog stay under threshold. To help your dog stay under threshold, you can learn what types of things might be triggers for your dog. Anything that creates stress, high arousal or overexcitement is a possible trigger. Identify both positive stressors (like rowdy play, chasing toys or hunting) and negative stressors (like scary dogs, strangers, or loud noises).

In addition, learn your dog's body language, and what signals precede your dog's going over threshold. For some dogs, you may notice tension, some may become more excited, and some may try to move away or start sniffing the ground. Most dogs take treats more roughly when they are getting close to threshold.

Stay focused on your dog. Any time you are in the presence of your dog's triggers, pay attention so you will notice if your dog's behavior or energy level shifts or you see stress signals.

If you notice your dog's arousal increasing, take action; don't wait for him to go over threshold. If your dog is getting close to threshold, you can:

- ✓ Create distance between your dog and the trigger.
- ✓ Do focus exercises to bring your dog into a thinking state.
- ✓ If necessary, leave the situation altogether.

Training and behavior modification are key tools when it comes to helping your dog stay under threshold. Over time, training can change a dog's threshold levels around certain triggers. Plus, when you are around a trigger, actively training can help keep your dog focused and in a less reactive state.

Should you work your dog close to threshold? If you are working with your dog on a particular behavioral challenge, you may purposely expose your dog to certain triggers. Ideally, you will find that balance of exposing your dog enough that he or she builds confidence and makes progress, but not so much that it causes undue stress.

Very important note: **If you are working on fear or reactivity, going over threshold frequently will slow your dog's progress.** If you see little or no improvement in a problem area, consider that you may be working your dog too close to threshold, or over threshold.

5. If your dog goes over threshold, take action. Let's face it: We cannot control everything that happens in our lives or our dog's lives. As much as we may try to help our dog stay under threshold, there may be times that he or she steps over and behaves badly. What can you do in that moment?

- ✓ Get your dog out of the situation immediately. This is not a time for training, learning, or fixing problems.
- ✓ Take note of all of the factors that led to your dog going over threshold.
- ✓ Make a plan for the next time you are in that situation, so that you can prevent it from happening again if at all possible.

Understanding the concept of thresholds can help in everyday learning situations for all of our dogs. Keeping a dog under threshold can promote an optimum learning state, which can make training happen faster and with less stress. For dogs with behavior challenges such as fear and reactivity, understanding the concept of thresholds and making an effort to keep the dog under threshold while you work through challenges can make a huge difference in progress and success. Understanding thresholds gives you an advantage when it comes to training and to helping your puppy or dog be calm and confident.

Thanks to Mardi Richmond, MA, CPDT-KA for this article. Mardi is a writer and trainer living in Santa Cruz, California with her partner and a wonderful heeler-mix named Chance.