

Decompressing Your New Dog

WHY DOES A DOG NEED TO DECOMPRESS?

Shelters and boarding kennels can be very stressful environments for dogs full of strange noises and smells. All of that can cause uncertainty and be overstimulating for a dog, causing them to act out in ways that they might not normally. Decompression is a calming period that a dog needs allowing them to acclimate when first arriving in your home. It is imperative the dog has this time to adjust to the new environment, people, and other animals. Many people do not realize how crucial decompression is and how this will make or break how your dog is introduced into the new home so please follow these recommendations and set your dog up for success.

We already know that your rescue dog is coming into your house already overstimulated from too many people, dogs' noises and sounds, and we need to help the dog decompress. Not only does this time let the dog relax, it also allows the dog to explore your house with their nose, while crated and secure but still learning about your other pets, children, etc. without the stress of a face-to-face meeting where body language might be misunderstood.

It is also imperative that the new dog and resident dog(s) have time to adjust to a new dog in the home. Many people do not realize that this takes time and cannot be rushed.

During this decompression time, we highly recommend **no long walks, car rides, pet store excursions, parties, social gatherings etc. UNTIL THE DOG IS READY.** (Necessary trips to the vet are excluded from this.) Any of the above activities or events provide an overabundance of stimuli and are very stressful, especially when the dog still has not started to bond with you and has no reason to trust you.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO DECOMPRESS A DOG?

Younger dogs, especially puppies, will take less time to decompress than adult dogs. The average decompression time is about two weeks, but it differs for every dog. For dogs that have spent a lengthy time in a shelter or kennel environment or that have not been well socialized and have not been exposed to much this can take months. Allow for at least the first 3-5 days of decompression. Then you can re-evaluate how much and what type of decompression your new dog will continue to need.

NUMBER ONE RULE: keep your new dog in a crate or a confined area (use baby gates or x-pens to section off an area) during decompression time, and always when you're not home. After decompression, and everyone's acquainted and comfortable, determine if your dog is ready to move past the decompression phase.

Make it a smooth transition with these tips on how to decompress a new rescue dog.

1. Forget expectations

No matter how much you plan, you won't know how a dog is going to react in their new environment until after you bring them home. The first 24 to 48 hours will be a learning experience for all. Leave your expectations at the door. Your situation and your dog are unique, so don't compare it to others.

2. Take your time

It can take weeks for your new rescue dog's personality to surface and longer if you have a dog that is under socialized, nervous or fearful. Don't expect to get a lot of sleep the first few nights, don't expect the dog to be perfect, and don't expect them to come into their new home exhibiting their true personality. It all takes time. The best thing you can do is go slowly. Your dog and your family will be happier in the long run.

- When you first get to your home, allow them to potty before entering the house, walk them calmly through the front door and while keeping them leashed, walk around your home. **NO FREE ROAMING. Other animals in the home should not be allowed to interact with the dog. They should be separated by a barrier (baby gate or x-pen) or placed in another room.**
- Once you have done a quick tour with the dog while they are on a leash, take them to their crate or area, allow them some water.
- With the dog still leashed, walk them to the door that you will be using to take them out to go potty and take them out. Bring them back in and put them in the crate or area and let them rest. It's important to establish the routine and structure of the crate and or area straight away.
- After some time, leash the dog and remove from the crate, hand feed them their meal (great bonding/engagement exercise) and then go outside for a potty break. **DO NOT FEED WITH YOUR OTHER DOGS AROUND.**
- **Then back inside for some "out of the crate time" (still leashed). NO rough play, NO wrestling, NO couch, NO beds, NO laps, NO kissy face, NO free roam through the house, NO interactions with any other pets, NO visits from your friends and family.**
- After free time, it's back outside (still leashed) for potty and then back in for some crate rest.
- Once you put your new dog in the crate or enclosed area, ignore them and let them rest. Resist the urge to engage with them if they whine or bark as this only reinforces that behaviour and often ends up making it worse.

3. Keep calm

A newly rescued dog needs a calm environment to acclimate. Keep things quiet and calm in your home as much as possible. Every sound, movement, and smell will be new to them. Keep toys and affection to a minimum. Let the dog come to you. Less is usually better at the beginning.

Resist the temptation to shower your dog with affection and toys. The real idea is you want to establish structure. You want a relationship that's founded on respect first and foremost, as well as love and affection – those things should weigh evenly.

4. Give them space

Dogs are den animals and need a space to feel safe. To help with the transition, give them a space that is quiet, comfortable, and cozy. Give your dog a spot to let them emerge out of their shell on their own accord. Initially limiting access to your home to one or two rooms will help to avoid overwhelming your

new dog and will also help to reduce accidents. Select an area of your home where your new dog has a choice between being with people and the other members of your household or being on their own. The crate should be in an area of the house that is neither isolated nor in the middle of everything. You want your new dog to observe you and your family without feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Think of this initial decompression time as your new dog being a passive observer of everything that is going on in your home rather than being an active participant of the goings on in the home which does not come until later. It is all about respecting each other's space; if your dog chooses to hang out by themselves for a while it is important that they have that choice. Leave the dog alone when they are in their crate and do not allow children to go into the area the dog is confined to or attempt to crawl or reach into the dog's crate.

5. Keep them on a leash

A leashed dog is a must for the safety of both your new dog and any other pets and will help keep you stay in control. The leash should essentially become your best friend. The idea is if the dog jumps on the couch, you don't have to grab the dog by the collar. You just simply grab the end of the leash and gently pull on the leash directing the dog off the couch. The same goes for the dog if they put their paws up on your kitchen counter or table. This keeps you safe, and it doesn't run the risk of harming your relationship with the dog.

6. Crate train

A crate is an easy and effective way to create a safe haven. Crate training is one of the quickest and least stressful ways to encourage desirable behaviors in dogs. Some new dog owners are not fans of using a crate, however, implementing crate training as soon as you bring a dog into your home will make life easier for you and your rescue dog. Using an enclosure such as an x-pen enclosure around the crate or placing the crate in a confined area and initially keeping the crate door open so the dog can venture in and out to get use to the crate can help for dogs that are very fearful of the crate. You can then start to build a positive association to the crate by rewarding the dog with treats anytime the dog enters the crate by tossing treats into the crate when they enter it and continuing to toss treats into the crate if the dog remains in the crate. You can further this positive association to the crate by starting to feed your new dog in the crate at mealtimes so that it becomes a safe, fun, and private place to hang out. All things that are good and positive should happen in the crate to ensure the dog starts to establish these positive associations to the crate. A crate should NEVER be used as punishment for a dog. Become familiar with how to properly crate train a dog and do not close the door unless you are sure the dog is already crate trained. A crate satisfies a dog's instinct to be in a den while alleviating many behavioral issues like resource guarding, separation anxiety, destructive behaviours and house-training issues.

For more info on crate training visit: <https://www.reboundhounds.org/crate-training1.html>

7. Slow introductions

For the first week, keep your dog at home and limit visitors. If your dog is not fully vaccinated, they must remain in your backyard only. When it comes time to make introductions to people and other pets, do it slowly. If you have other animals, it's best to let them get acquainted with the new dog outside your home first (if your new dog is not fully vaccinated, start with the front yard). Utilizing pack walks with other dogs in the home is a great way for each dog to establish a positive association to the other dog

because they are both doing something they enjoy which is going on a walk together. Advise your friends (especially children) to give your new dog “face space.” Ask them to resist the urge to touch or get in their face. Let your dog go to them and pay close attention to how they communicate comfort or discomfort. Dogs are very good at picking up on visual cues. Learn about dog body language which can be very subtle but tell you very clearly as to whether your dog is anxious or nervous about what is happening. Keep in mind that a dog that growls is only communicating that they are uncomfortable. Many people become afraid when a dog growls and will discipline a dog for doing so which should not be done. Growling is your dog’s way of vocalizing that they are not comfortable with what is happening and asking you for help in removing them from the uncomfortable situation. If you ignored their body language or did not pick up on the fact that the dog was uncomfortable then vocalizations such as growling may occur as well to let you know they are not ok with what is happening at that moment.

Do not allow anyone to stare directly at your dog or hover over them in a stooped position. For humans, looking at the person they are interacting with is considered polite. For a dog, a direct stare is an implied threat. Instead, encourage a brief look and then look away. Sitting or getting down on the dog’s eye level makes humans more approachable. People who are stationary and not moving around are less threatening are people who are lower to the ground. Keep any movement slow and calm. Never reach your hand out to a dog but rather sit still and allow the dog to come to you and sniff you. If you are going to give a dog a treat do not feed the dog by hand but rather gently toss the treat past the dog so they can take the treat and then decide how close to come to you. Some food motivated dogs will overcome their fear and approach to take a treat from a person’s hand but once the treat is gone they realize they are too close for comfort which may cause a fearful dog to react negatively.

8. Exercise them every day

The adage “a good dog is a tired dog” is true for a reason. Dogs are active creatures. They need a daily exercise routine to keep them physically and mentally healthy. Get the leash and take them for a short walks the first week or two (if they are fully vaccinated) to improve you and your dog’s health while establishing a positive bond. It is ok to have a few short walks throughout the day. If your dog seems anxious or nervous of all of the noise and moving things in the environment then adjust the times you walk and the routes you take to minimize the stressors on your dog. Go walking when traffic is less busy and the abundance of other people/children outside is less. Choose quiet side streets or trails that are not busy to keep your dog from becoming too stressed. If you have a fearful or anxious dog keeping to the same route helps them to become familiar with things so they are not constantly exposed to different stressors in the environment. Once your dog is comfortable with you, longer walks around the neighborhood can be taken. If your dog is too fearful and not paws-on-the-ground ready; throwing the ball in the backyard or playing with puzzles can help provide stimulation.

A dog can be exercised through mental stimulation just as much as physical exertion. Here are some helpful links to show how using a Kong as well as mental enrichment toys to engage your new dog mentally can help mentally exhaust them in order to prevent many problem behaviours. Using some of these toys while your rescue is in their crate will help create a positive association to the crate and make crate training that much easier.

<https://youtu.be/LwZl1isnvPQ> (Use of a Kong)

<https://youtu.be/SKI-Ig1jeGk> (Mental Enrichment Toys)

9. Keep a routine

Dogs are creatures of habit. Their happiness depends on their environment. Dogs need a steady routine, so they know what to expect from their owners and their lives. Their behavior will reflect this accordingly. Once they have a solid structure, they can handle occasional changes like a pro. Feeding, walking, playing, sleeping, and other daily activities can all be a part of your dog's regularly scheduled routine.

10. Establish positive associations

It's your job to help your dog form positive associations in their new environment. You want your new dog to feel like their home and all the sights, sounds, and smells that come with it, are the most wonderful things in the world. Keep treats on hand to praise and reward your dog if you're getting ready to vacuum or there's a fire truck siren blaring. Your dog will soon associate any unpleasant experiences with that of comfort, affection, and yummy treats.

THE TAKEAWAY

Decompression is a key step toward ensuring a successful home transition for your new dog. Time spent getting to know your dog will be well worth the love they give you in return. Not all dogs know how to be a dog, but many are willing to learn if we help them, and if we can just slow the process down and give them time to learn it will help immensely.

Dogs learn through experiences, both good and bad ones. Through those experiences, they shape their understanding of the world and how to react to certain things. Your dog's way of thinking can be summed up by a sequence of "If/then" statements. If I see a dog, then I need to do this. If I see a cat, then I need to do this. If someone rings the doorbell, then I need to do this. The more we shape those experiences with positivity, and the more positive experiences we provide, the more we can do for misunderstood, abused, unwanted and neglected dogs that might not otherwise make it out the front door.

Everything is about being realistic with your abilities, your time and your other obligations. It's the only way to set your dogs and your rescue dogs up for success.

HELPFUL RULES FOR NEW DOGS

- NEVER LEAVE DOGS UNATTENDED with toys or bones.
- We prefer all rescue dogs to sleep in their crate or a confined area at least for the first few weeks during decompression and separation time- unless there are serious issues with crate anxiety. Thereafter you may wish to have them sleep in their own bed. We do not like to encourage furniture or human beds as this can be a hard habit to break.

- We do not suggest any kind of retractable leashes whatsoever, as they give you absolutely no control. Please use a leash that you can easily and swiftly bring your dog to you and away from danger/other animals. We also highly recommend a martingale collar as this prevents dogs from backing out of the collar or harness and escaping. We also recommend double leashing bigger dogs, as all new dogs can be flight risks.
- If you have a fenced yard, please do not ever leave the dog unsupervised until you know exactly how high they can jump- you would be surprised how high some dogs can jump when triggered or excited. If you have a chain link fence regardless of height some dogs can climb these very easily.
- No food bowls left out (even if empty) and dogs should be fed separately at least for the first few months (preferably indefinitely, but at least until you are absolutely sure there is no resource guarding on either side).
- Do not leave dogs unattended for at least the first few months and then ONLY if and when you are absolutely sure they are safe together (and there are no bones, toys or anything that could trigger a fight).

HOUSE TRAINING

Sometimes new dogs, even if house trained, will need a refresher and some guidance on where to eliminate. As soon as possible, take your new dog to the area where you want them to eliminate. Let them sniff as long as they want to gather information. If they eliminate right away have a small party with treats and lots of praise. We recommend for the first couple of days to let them out immediately after waking up, after eating, drinking water, or play time. If your dog eliminates outside then eliminates again when brought inside, next time allow the dog to eliminate outside then walk the dog around for another 5 to 10 minutes before bringing it back inside. It would be wise for the foster/adopter to observe a dog's potty habits to pick up on the dog's cue for when it needs to go out to eliminate.

Make use of baby gates, barriers and close doors to rooms to keep the dog out of areas where they may go to eliminate. Most dogs will wander off to do their business when you are not watching so keeping the area where they can go smaller will make it easier to supervise them. You can also use a leash and tether the dog to your waist so they are never out of your sight. This way you will immediately see if the dog attempts to squat or lift a leg to eliminate and can use the leash to quickly direct them outside.

CRATE TRAINING

Crates are one of the most important and beneficial tools we have at our disposal. Crates are useful for management of our dogs when we are house training them and for keeping our dogs safe when we can't watch them. Crates are a useful tool when we have a dog who is experiencing behavioral issues such as; nervousness, territorial issues, pacing, separation anxiety and if they are not yet trustworthy to be left free without chewing inappropriate items. Dogs are den dwelling animals and crates are the modern alternative to the dens they would have in the wild. When introduced properly, our dogs will view the crate as a safe, cozy place to be calm and relax. A place that is free from stress where they can retire to when they begin to feel overwhelmed.

- Set up a crate in a corner of the kitchen or living room. We want our dogs to be able to observe us but not be in the middle of all the foot traffic through our house. Avoid having the crate in an area of the house where he is isolated. If the dog is fearful of the crate you can use an enclosure such as an x-pen around the crate and keep the crate door open to work on establishing a positive association to the crate.
- Put soft bedding in the crate and cover all sides but the door with a dark blanket ... creating a den-like feel.
- Leash and collar the dog, toss some treats into the crate, guide the dog in saying the word “crate” as he is walking in. When he eats the treat, use the leash to guide him out. Repeat 5-10 times. This exercise is just to give an initial positive association to simply entering the crate. Look for opportunities to reward the dog with treats when they go into the crate all on their own so always have treats close by and handy to reward this behaviour.
- With the dog still leashed, toss treats in the crate, gently guide the dog in while saying “crate” and when he is all the way in, close the door. Wait 3-5min. Open the door and use the leash to guide him out. Don’t allow him to barge out, during this exercise, you, the human, control the entering and exiting of the crate. Repeat gradually increasing the time the dog is in the crate.
- Leave the door to the crate open and allow the dog to go in and out on their own. Most dogs will explore a crate that looks inviting, one that is dark and comfy. Put some appropriate chew toys, like Kongs and Nylabones, in the crate to further encourage the dog to relax and spend time in the crate.
- Practice entering and exiting the crate several times and add in longer stays with the door closed.
- If the dog has a tantrum, barks, cries or whines ... IGNORE THEM. Don’t talk to them, don’t yell at them, don’t look at them or engage in anyway. As soon as they quiet down, walk over to the crate, say “good boy/girl” in a light tone, not over the top excitement and reward them and guide the dog out. Being quiet in the crate is simply a non-negotiable rule. Be careful not to put too much emotion into it. Repeat, slowly adding time in the crate.

Crate your new dog at night. You should have had the opportunity to practice the above exercises so the crate should be a familiar place for the dog. Have a nighttime routine something like this:

1. Pick up water 2-3 hours before bed.
2. Take the dog out to potty one last time 10-20 min before bed.
3. Turn off the lights, leave on a white noise machine or radio on classical music.
4. Cover the door to the crate halfway with a blanket (increasing the den-like feel)
5. Say “good night” in an even toned, non-emotional way and leave the room. If the dog is more comfortable sleeping in a crate that is in the bedroom you may want to consider having one crate in the bedroom and one on the main level.

Remember to ignore any whining or barking. Most dogs will settle down quickly once they realize they will not get any attention for acting up.

- If you have a dog who throws tantrums of epic proportions, zip tie all sides of the crate, the bottom of the crate where the pan slides out and put Carabiner style clips (available at hardware stores) along the door. But still IGNORE ALL MELTDOWNS. Any attention they get, even scolding (which only encourages the barking and nonsense) is still giving them attention.

For the small percentage of manic dogs, push the crate against a wall (side and back), place a piece of furniture on the exposed side and place something heavy on top. Once the dog realizes his attempts of escape are futile, he will give up and settle down.

- When you wake up, wait 10-15 min BEFORE you let the dog out of the crate. You want to avoid the dog expecting for you to open his kennel first thing. The same goes for when you get home from work. Wait 10-15 min for them to calm down BEFORE they are allowed to exit the crate.
- It's crucial that ALL entering and exiting of the crate is done when the dog is calm. If this is done consistently from the beginning, you will decrease the possibility of future issues.
- Crating your new dog during the day, when you are at work, is necessary to ensure they stay safe. If you work from home, it's important to schedule blocks of crate time for the dog. Dogs who NEVER leave their adopters side NEVER learn to be independent and are prime dogs for developing Separation Anxiety.
- All of your comings and goings, when you are crating your dog must be non-emotional. Remember, crating a dog is not a punishment. When trained correctly your dog views his crate a safe place. A den. A sanctuary, away from our hectic world.