

Decompression

Bringing a new rescue dog home

Moving into a new home can be REALLY stressful - especially if the home already contains other dogs, or children or is just plain busy! On top of that depending on the backstory of the new pup you are bringing home they may be moving from a very stressful environment as well.

It takes some time to adjust to a new home, and throwing a new dog into a household, especially a dog with an unknown background, a recent rescue, or a dog who has experienced trauma in the past, can end in big time disaster!

Thankfully there are lots of things we can do to set up for success and help aid the transition for our new pups or foster pups.

Decompression Room:

A "decompression room" is EXACTLY what it sounds like! A room for someone to decompress in. Our new dogs or foster dogs have been through a lot, what they need more than anything is a moment to BREATHE, to have a space where they can feel safe and take time to relax and get their bearings. For many dogs, an apartment or house is a VERY large and scary space, creating a small, quiet place that can be "theirs" helps provide a sense of comfort and security in an otherwise scary world!

Making a Decompression Room:

Pick a room, or if your home is too small to temporarily dedicate a room to your new arrival, get creative - use a large walk in closet, or use gates and furniture to create a smaller area. Once you've chosen your spot - it's time to get set up by designing the area with calm, relaxing, happy feelings in mind. Your decompression room should have:

- A secure crate covered on all sides except the front by a blanket or sheet

- If your dog finds the crate stressful, leave it in the room with the door open and provide a comfortable bed inside the crate and another outside.
- If you use a “pen” instead of a crate, hang blankets/sheets over the gate to make it more cozy and secure
- A comfortable bed (ideally two - one in the crate and one out)
- Entertainment: Dog safe toys, chews, frozen kongs, and food puzzles to give your dog something to do.
- A white or brown noise machine to help buffer the sound of your household, especially if your home is very busy or your dog is fearful/nervous.
- Calming classical music or calming music for dogs such as the “Through a Dogs Ear” Products (www.throughadogsear.com)
- Calming pheromone products such a Adaptil™ plug in diffuser in the area

Puppy proofing!

Keep tempting or dangerous objects out of the way or behind a gate until you learn more about your new friends habits!

There you go! You have now created a wonderful, peaceful place for your dog to spend time adjusting to his/her new home.

So, what’s next??

Early Days - Building Trust:

Some dogs may be ready to integrate into the house pretty quickly, while others may need much longer to settle in, build trust and gain confidence in their environment. For the first few days your dog should remain in the decompression room most of the time, with the exception of potty breaks or other activities. Create a schedule/routine for potty breaks and meals. Rather than immediately focusing on showing your dog off to the world, take this time to spend time in their world, in their room getting to know them, what treats do they like? Do they enjoy toys? Look for signs of any concerning behaviors such as fear or aggression. This is a great time for some basic trust building exercises, such as:

- Hand feeding meals or treats
- Giving long-lasting food treats such as stuffed Kong's, bones or food puzzles
- Practicing relaxation exercises and conditioning calm behavior
- Playing "no pressure" games of "find it" (tossing treats one at a time on the floor to your dog)
- Massaging and petting your dog while settling (if the dog is comfortable with body handling)
- Passive attention - just spending time in the room with them, sitting on a chair working on your laptop or phone or reading a book. If your dog successfully occupies himself or settles down, reward with periodic treats.
- If you have another dog (or cat) swap scent items between the two by giving each dog a blanket or bed and swapping the objects every few days. This allows the dogs to get used to the scent of their new housemate, before the pressure of a face to face meeting.

Transitioning Time:

Assuming they're doing well so far, after a few days of arrival you can help your new dog begin to transition to other areas of the house and family pets. This is the time where most people struggle as it is tempting to move quickly and try to integrate the dog completely, as soon as possible. Slow the process down, especially if you have other dogs in the home. It may take longer to do a slow introduction but it is worth it as you will greatly increase your chances of success - remember, your dog has been through a LOT, let them take time to gain the confidence they need!

During this time you can:

- Bring your dog out on leash to explore the house a little everyday. Give them the freedom to choose where to go (while keeping them out of trouble when needed!) and let them sniff EVERYTHING! As an added bonus - any time your dog looks up at you to check in, smile and feed a small treat! This fosters more trust, confidence and creates a team between the two of you. Keep sessions short if your dog is nervous, and return to their decompression room for breaks.
- If you have another dog, or dogs, have them isolated to another area of the home when you allow your pup out to explore.
- As your dog gains confidence in the house, play your fun "find it" games, or practice some basic fun sits and downs for rewards out in the house!

Introducing to Existing Dog(s):

The goal is to build a RELATIONSHIP between your existing dog(s) and your new dog, this can take some time depending on the dogs - so be sure to not just throw your dogs together, while sometimes this works out when it doesn't it can be VERY hard or impossible to repair the damage of a traumatic introduction period. So, even though it can be exciting to grow your canine family take a deep breath and think BIG PICTURE, and take it slow! The following suggested exercises are not intended to be done in one sitting, and depending on the comfort levels of the dogs could take a few days or several weeks.

- Begin with the dogs separated by a sturdy baby gate or other physical barrier. If you have more than one existing dog, introduce them each separately.
- If you have enough people, have both dogs leashed and kept several feet away from the gate to prevent them from rushing up too quickly. If you don't have another person to hold a leash, leash one dog while the other remains free behind the gate.
- At this distance, play your 'find it' game with each dog (if you are working solo, toss treats over the gate to the loose dog while dropping treats on the ground for the leashed dog). This allows the dogs to see each other peripherally but the game prevents either dog from becoming too fixated or excited, it keeps both parties calm and in their thinking brains.
- If both parties remain calm playing "find it" move closer, until the dogs are comfortable sitting close to the gate. Standing at the gate reward first one dog with a hand fed treat and then the other, back and forth.
- While doing this, watch the dogs for signs they want to move closer and meet their new sibling - loose happy wiggly butts, play bows and relaxed movements are all signs of engagement! When both dogs show signs of wanting to be friends you can proceed to introduce them to each other. If possible, start by taking the dogs for a parallel walk, walking on-leash "together" in the same direction, but far enough apart to prevent contact initially before letting them play.

Final Notes

- Continue to use your decompression room for bedtime and down time, while gradually opening up the house 1-2 rooms at a time, growing your dog's world slowly.
- If you have another dog remember that relationship building is a process, for the first several weeks interactions should be somewhat limited and controlled. Walk the dogs together or provide periods of mutual freedom in the house followed by down time in the decompression room. Continue to

reward both dogs for good behavior when they are together, and continue to practice exercises such as hand feeding treats to both dogs to build a strong positive association between the dogs.

- If you hit a snag introducing your dogs together or even just introducing the dog to the home, slow the process down and if the problem persists get a professional trainer over to your house to help keep you on track!