

The Bucket

We can all relate to the idioms: 'that's the final straw', 'that's the straw that broke the camel's back', or 'that's done it'. All of these phrases convey the notion - that a seemingly small event - has pushed someone over their limit of tolerance. Going over your limit of tolerance, tends to cause a big and over the top reaction, due to a cumulative effect of previous frustrations or negative emotions (known as Trigger Stacking), during the day or week.

Well, 'The Bucket', is a visual representation of trigger stacking and going over your stress limit. All the stressful (good and bad stress) events, that have happened during the day or week, pours into the stress bucket. At some point a thimble sized amount, will pour in and the bucket will overflow, resulting in an over-the-top reaction, to a very small event. It's a good exercise to think of the *events that* fill our bucket, to try and prevent this stress overload.



Well, our dogs are no different, in fact every mammal, animal and insect have been found to have a stress 'bucket', which can become full and overflow. If you've ever found yourselves saying, 'well my dog has never done that before', after your dog has barked and lunged at something, you'll be witnessing their 'bucket', overflowing!

The bucket can be big or small, depending on the personality and the skills your dog has, and they could have a resting level that's either quite empty or much more full. Every dog is different and as their human, we have the exciting and fun role of understanding our own dog's personality.



So now, we understand that our dogs (and us) have a bucket, we can take a look at some events that may pay into the bucket.

These events can be big or small, happen once or twice in a day, week, month or year or something that happens all the time e.g. itchy skin, pain and/or gastrointestinal issues. The events that happen all the time, we can think of as 'drizzle or rain', always filling that bucket!

Events that happen once a day, such as the post coming (barking at the door or shredding the mail) or next doors cat walking across the fence, can be an event for some dogs. These dogs typically will be the ones barking at the door or shredding the mail and staring at the cat through the window, unable to move away or barking and lunging at the window. These events could be the equivalent to a pint glass pouring into the bucket or even 4 pint glasses in some cases.

Going for walk or two in a day, where your dog might react to other dogs or cars or people, followed by running after a ball or playing with other dogs. Potentially, that could be equivalent to 3 or 4 pint glasses on each walk, pouring into the bucket! Remember positive events pay into the bucket too.

Family members coming home, resulting in jumping, spinning, humping and or barking, we can add another glass full or more into the bucket for that.

So, in time, we can see how that bucket fills. At this point it may take a very small event like seeing a pigeon in the garden, a pushchair on the way home from a walk and boom.... the bucket overflows and the reaction from the dog is extreme i.e 'lights on no one's home' kind of chaos on the end of the lead! You get the idea.

Then, we have those events that fill the bucket in one sitting.....e.g your dog being attacked by another dog (for some dogs, a dog running up and invading their space could be a bucket filling experience), a new rescue dog going into a new home. Firework season (it's no longer confined to the 5th of November!). We have to keep in mind all dogs are individuals and experience events differently. A stressful bucket filling incident for one dog, could be a shot glass for another!

It's worth noting here, that if an event has been stressful and caused stress hormones to be released, it may be 72 hours or more - before your dogs stress hormones have depleted enough to be at base level again and have an empty bucket and that's only their if nothing else pours into that bucket during that time!

How to stop the bucket overflowing

The good news is, we can reduce the events that pour into our dog's bucket, we can increase the size of our dogs bucket and also help our dog to empty their bucket. We can do this a number of ways.

Firstly, it's always worth having our dog checked by the vet, for health problems. As we already know health problems pay into the bucket all the time. If we can elevate health problems, we can reduce the amount paying into the bucket.



Calmness, being able to sleep during the day and at night, being content and relaxed helps to empty the bucket. Sleep plays a huge role in regulating our dogs bucket levels (and ours).

Chewing, licking and sniffing, all help to relieve stress and help to empty your dog's bucket.

Lifestyle can influence what pays into the bucket too. Stopping the rehearsal of barking at the post by (in the short term) fitting an outside post box or stop access to the door at the time of the post. Even reducing access to the window, to avoid your dog barking at the post person or passers-by in general, can minimise or preventing these events from paying into the bucket in the first place.

Teaching your dogs to be optimistic in the face of novelty i.e new and strange things are nothing to be concerned about, turn novelty into a good deal for your dog and nothing to be concerned with. This can be achieved by pairing anything novel with food (if food is rewarding to your dog) or a low-level activity that they enjoy.

The greatest gifts we can give to our dogs, are teaching them the skills of disengagement (seeing greater value from moving away from exciting or scary things), confidence and optimism (feeling good in themselves and seeing things that happen in a positive and empowering light), management of their own arousal levels through emotional coping strategies. Developing the ability to be calm and relaxed enough for sleep, to help your dog empty their bucket or even enlarge it so they can cope with more stress without the bucket overflowing

These skills are easy and fun for you and your dog and can be taught through games that take as little as 1 minute up to 3 minutes per day.

Book in a 1-2-1 with Petfect and allow me to help get you and your dog back on track and being team mates again.