

TRIGGER STACKING:

TAKING CARE OF OUR PETS, OUR PATIENTS, AND OURSELVES

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“No, he’s really a nice dog, I don’t know why he’s being so snappy,” or “She’s never scratched anyone before, how odd!” These are the types of comments I often hear after a patient has just lashed out unexpectedly. It’s a moment that leaves me wondering what caused the shift, and of course I always take it personally. We’ve all experienced those uncharacteristic explosions—whether from our pets, our colleagues, or ourselves—that occur following a seemingly innocuous event. Understanding why these outbursts happen can help us avoid them or at least manage them better.

A series of small irritants, each quietly siphoning a small amount of patience from a finite reservoir, can build up over time. Then, a tiny thing—a pen that won’t write—pushes you into a complete rage. Anybody witnessing this overblown response to a seemingly minor offence perpetrated by a pen would think you had completely lost your mind. Similarly, for a patient, an otherwise innocent pat on the head results in a painful bite that “came out of nowhere.” To them, though, it isn’t sudden at all. It’s the last straw of a long stack of stressors simmering under the cloak of normal behaviour that finally tips the balance.

WHAT IS TRIGGER STACKING?

Trigger stacking refers to a phenomenon where multiple stressors or scary situations occur within a short time span, resulting in a large reaction to an otherwise minor stressor. This concept is widely recognized in dog training but is also applicable to humans and other animals. Trigger stacking occurs when triggers happen back-to-back without an opportunity to recover or refill your coping reservoir.

What kind of triggers can there be? These are highly variable between all animals, including people, and influenced by both internal factors (hormone changes, health, prior experiences) and external factors (weather, noise, temperature, other animals/people, etc.). The interplay of internal and external factors helps us understand how triggers work. When multiple factors combine, they lower one’s overall threshold, making it easier for a reaction to be triggered. Individually, certain triggers might not lead to an attack, but when these triggers pile up, they push an individual’s system to its limit, surpassing their threshold and setting off an attack. This threshold isn’t fixed—it fluctuates based on many variables both individually and between individuals.

For people, common triggers might include sleep disruptions, bad weather, a speeding ticket, a dog that won’t stop barking, or a phone ringing incessantly. When these things pile up without time to recover, a broken pen might be the straw that breaks the camel’s back, leading to a complete meltdown.

For a dog or cat, the build-up of triggers might look like this: they’re interrupted from a nice nap, put into a crate, driven in a car on a different route than when they drive to the park, forced to deal with barking dogs in the waiting room, and then placed on the exam table. After all that, a simple needle prick or temperature check can feel like the final straw. Broken down like this, there is nothing sudden in the mind of the patient who “suddenly” loses it!

While we often don’t stop to consider why we just pulverized the pen, taking a moment afterward to reflect can help us understand what happened. “Self (I say), I think the frustration from being late, getting a ticket, stepping in a puddle, and getting a paper cut left me with no patience for that stupid pen.” In the heat of the moment, it’s tough to pull ourselves back, but with time and practice, we can get better at it.



“HOW DO WE MANAGE THESE ESCALATING REACTIONS BEFORE THEY REACH A TIPPING POINT?”

MANAGING TRIGGER STACKING

Understanding how triggers stack is one thing, but how do we manage these escalating reactions before they reach a tipping point? To handle trigger stacking, we need to tap into our inner resources—our emotional intelligence, resilience, self-awareness, and coping strategies. This can range from practicing mindfulness to simply getting more sleep or taking regular breaks. We can’t always control the external stressors in life, but we can recognize when they’re building up and take steps to prevent our reactions from boiling over.

This isn’t always easy, and I’m definitely not perfect at it myself. But a little self-awareness and patience can go a long way in preventing those outbursts that seem to come out of nowhere. The good news is, while we can’t control everything around us, we can control how we respond. By understanding our own triggers and those of our pets, we can better manage the emotional cost, either by avoiding certain situations or by pairing them with coping strategies. For example, if constant noise is a trigger during the day, you might reduce its impact by keeping the kennel room door closed, turning down phone ringers, or adjusting their tones. Taking breaks more often, eating a more nutritious lunch, or getting more sleep the night before can also help keep your emotional reserves intact. Similarly, for your pet, you can reduce their exposure to triggers by changing the route you take to the park, followed by a fun activity or treat. If they’re due for a veterinarian visit, maybe stop in just for a weigh-in and give them a treat afterward or even use anti-anxiety medication if necessary to help them stay within their coping zone (below their threshold).

IT’S A PROCESS

Recognizing your unique triggers is a gradual process that requires patience and self-awareness. If you know how trigger stacking works, you might be able to catch yourself before things escalate or at least improve your ability to warn those around you of an impending explosion. I find myself telling those around me when I need a break that “I’m getting stacked.” Take a moment to pause, reflect, and give yourself a little grace. These reactions are normal, and they happen to everyone. The key is recognizing them and managing them effectively, which will improve your enjoyment of work, productivity, and mental health. [WCV](#)