



A mental workout for your dog

As you definitely noticed by now, counterconditioning is actually a rather low-key activity as far as physical exertion. Unless your dog completely flips out and throws himself around on the leash (and that would be a definite sign that you need to abort and set up better situations) he will not actually get a lot of physical exercise out of the training.

You might worry that your dog needs a lot more physical activity in order to really feel tired and that the counterconditioning sessions are not true "exercise". But - that's not a fear that's warranted.

You need to know that dogs do not just get tired from physical activity, but just as much or even more from mental challenges.

It's actually the same with humans.

If you have a desk job or have worked in an office in the past, you will definitely have experienced being quite tired at night without having done any actual physical labor.

I would even argue that counterconditioning is not just a mental workout for the dog, but actually an emotional one as well. And dealing with big emotions can be really exhausting for dogs - and for humans.

I have a little story for you here from my time as an in-person dog trainer. Working with clients always requires emotional effort on the trainer's part (if the trainer does it right). Because when I am recommending an approach to a client, I am always taking into account what I know about their dog, what I know about them, what kind of lifestyle they have, how much time they have for training, what other training approaches we tried in the past and how those worked ... and that is emotional work - it requires a lot of empathy. Of course, it's work that I love doing - that's why I am a dog trainer. But still, it requires effort and too much of it is very tiring.

Anyway, in group classes this was especially pronounced. Because in group classes trainers have to switch this emotional tuning in from one student to the next and to the next ... that is a lot of thoughts and considerations to keep straight in one's head!



And a long time ago, after one of my first afternoons with multiple group classes in a row and a total of 27 different students, I actually just fell asleep during a break while sitting in a chair in the middle of the day. This is how tiring it was!

Now, your dog goes through something similar. Looking at a trigger that formerly produced intense stress responses, and eating treats and starting to feel a bit better about this trigger is a ton of emotional labor. This is not just your dog standing around getting treats for free.

This is your dog going through a really big internal process. And it is completely normal that dogs are tired afterwards and need a break.

Please do not think that just because your dog mostly stood around and ate during your training session, he is in need of some kind of immediate additional workout. I would really encourage you to NOT go home and play half an hour of fetch right afterwards. Instead, it would be much better to give your dog some time to rest after the training.

Exhaustion is cumulative. Your dog does not need a physical workout AND a mental workout in order to feel tired. Just 10 minutes of counterconditioning can really knock some dogs out for a few hours. Definitely do not wake up your dog if he is asleep after your training session in order to go and do more stuff.

Your dog will guide you in just how much rest he needs after your training. Some dogs take a nap and are ready to go again. But I have even worked with others that needed pretty much the rest of the day to process and rest. And that is totally ok.

The intensity of your counterconditioning session will also determine how tiring it is for your pup. In a session in which your dog for example crossed the threshold, but was ready to recover and calm down again, and then he crossed the threshold once more and recovered, he really did a TON of emotional and mental work.

Whereas a session of calm counterconditioning to a recording of barking dogs at home might not be as exhausting for him.

Last but not least - as mentioned in the lesson on the best mood for counterconditioning, we also do NOT want to wear our dogs out before the training session. So I also do not



want you to completely exhaust your dog with physical activity before you go out and train. I know that some dog trainers recommend this, but it's really not smart. The reasoning behind this recommendation is that a dog that's physically tired might just not have the energy to react very intensely to a trigger.

However, a dog really has to be very very tired in order to ignore a trigger. This is not a realistic setup and usually goes poorly.

Because what happens much more often is that the physical exhaustion takes away some of the dog's mental and emotional capacities and the dog is actually more likely to react or to not recover once he's crossed the threshold.

As a human example: If YOU are physically tired (maybe after a day of helping your friends move) YOU probably also do not have a ton of mental or emotional capabilities left, right? And if pushed close to those boundaries, you would also be likely to snap.

The takeaway from this segment is that your dog is doing true, hard work by just in quotations "standing around and eating". Do not underestimate the tiring effects of counterconditioning and do not push your dog to also perform physical feats before or after.

Observe your dog - he will let you know when he is ready to go again.