

Using treats and dopamine to get super motivation

If you just hand your dog a treat after they do a behavior, that is a reward. It's what the dog expects to happen. But it doesn't guarantee it will motivate the dog to do the behavior again and it doesn't cause a dopamine release. If you want to INCREASE the effort or enthusiasm your dog has in doing something, you need a reinforcer/motivator and a dopamine release.

Dopamine is a brain chemical that, in simple terms, affects the amount of joy and motivation the dog feels about something. When you can generate this at key moments, you get a dog that is HIGHLY motivated to 'do the thing' and gets excited at the first hint of doing the thing. But the key to understanding the dopamine release is: **what the dog gets for doing the thing has to be GREATER than what the dog expected to get.** (read that again)

Here's how the process works:

1. You pull out a prop and when the dog interacts with it, they get a treat (or several). If dog didn't predict that the prop would bring a treat (or several) they get a release of dopamine.
2. Dog sees the prop again and they get the expected treats, but also some handler excitement or praise that they didn't expect.
3. The next time the dog sees the prop, **THE SIGHT OF THE PROP CAUSES THE DOPAMINE RELEASE!** The dog anticipates getting a reward for interacting with the prop before the dog even gets a treat!

So you might be wondering how you keep making the reward greater than what the dog expects. The good news is, you don't have to. But you DO have to become a slot machine. There is a reason that gambling is so addictive and it's because the random rewards perfectly generate dopamine. Each "1" on the bar below is a bonus reward. You can see how the random extra helps maintain the dopamine.



If you give the same reward every time, the dog knows what to expect and it doesn't cause a dopamine release.



If the greater (unexpected) "bonus" motivators happen at random, then when those moments of greater reward happen, they are not expected! You can operate on a

completely random bonus schedule independent of the dog's behavior and get a highly motivated dog.

But if those moments happen to combine with the dog's best efforts, you get even faster progress, more joy and increased motivation. But you have to set the dog up to succeed so they have plenty of best effort moments to pair with the unexpected bonus rewards.

How do you do a bonus reward?

You simply need to make it extra or more of what your dog LOVES than what you normally give:

- Extra treats
- Special extra yummy treats
- Add effusive genuine praise
- Add your excitement to the praise (pretend the dog just found you a \$100 bill)
- A treat scatter (drop a bunch of treats on the floor for the dog to 'vacuum' up)
- Add petting and physical play if your dog loves it
- Add play with the food, like 'chase the treat' you toss, or a toy if your dog loves that
- Add variety and the unexpected (most dogs enjoy this, some don't)
- Add challenges (some dogs really love to solve a challenge)

If your dog always gets just one treat while you focus on whatever is next, or the same reward over and over, you are paying minimum wage. So you can expect minimum wage motivation. If you show disappointment or frustration, that can reduce dopamine (& joy and motivation in your dog).

Don't be stingy!

Learning new things is hard!

How does this effect patterns and chains of behavior?

One of the reasons patterns are so powerful is that whatever happens at the end of the chain, helps reinforce the previous step or behavior in the chain/string of behaviors. When each part gets rewarded by the step that follows it, the pattern stays strong. The dog starts to build anticipation and excitement when they know what the pattern will predict (a fun slot machine at the end!) And if you toss in random bonus rewards along that chain of behaviors, it can generate even more excitement and anticipation!

But my dog is already over-the-top crazy excited!

If you have a dog that is motivated by breathing, or very easy to motivate (or 'over motivate') with food or toys, then understanding the information above can help you avoid sending

your dog into ‘orbit’ where they can no longer think. If they get too much dopamine, they can get frantic and just start crashing through whatever you are trying to do. These dogs need a calm approach with rewards that are much lower on the ‘love it scale’ and way longer between the bonus rewards. Also try to keep yourself calm and controlled.

Give your over-the-top dog plenty of physical outlets for their energy and try to do as much calm “brain work” as possible (doing things like puzzles that engage the dog’s brain without involving running or fast movement). You’ll need to work on self-control with them, but don’t make EVERYTHING about self-control. They may need to bounce back and forth between control and crazy to be ABLE to have the moments of self-control. Focus more on calmness and relaxed movement vs. rigid self-control:

- Sniff walks in nature on a 6-10’ lead, where you stop when the dog finds something interesting and let them investigate or do a treat scatter in grass or other vegetation to get them sniffing when they get too excited can help calm their mind and reduce their dopamine.
- Working on a chew or frozen filled toy while staying on a bed can help with calmness and reduce dopamine.
- Working on duration of stillness with their head in a box and delivering treats slowly and calmly can help promote calm.
- Using a treat they have to lick, like a frozen filled treat dispenser is more calming (& easier on your hands) than giving treats directly to the dog.
- Rewarding the dog for calm quiet behavior as they watch the world go by while in a parked car can help them learn calmness (choose their view carefully and build up to more exciting views).

These dogs, in the right frame of mind, can usually handle several repetitions of the same thing with minimal bonus rewards as long as the thing they are doing isn’t jacking them up even higher each time they do it. Strive for a maintenance level of energy where they can still think. Your energy should model what you want from the dog because if you are both frantic or over the top, it will just spiral up. But while you project calm on the outside, you have to mentally be a step or two ahead of your dog.

Over the top dogs can be super exciting and AMAZING when they are ‘on it’ and working with the right amount of dopamine. But more often it is exhausting and high stress to try to keep them under control. Just keep at it and keep your focus on calmness. You’ll get there!

Bonus info:

If your dog is in pain or sick, including chronic issues, their body's ability to produce dopamine may be reduced. Some dogs, like some people, also have higher or lower production of dopamine.

Reduced dopamine can result in lethargy, lack of motivation, fatigue, moodiness, and inability to feel pleasure. As well as brain fog, anxiety, memory issues, and depression.

Dopamine production relies on the amino acid Tyrosine. This is naturally occurring in:

- Soy protein isolate & whey protein
- Animal products: Dried egg whites, Parmesan, Gruyere, Romano cheese, lean beef, pork, chicken, turkey, and fish, like salmon and cod.
- Soy products (tofu, soybeans, soy milk)
- Seeds and nuts: pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, and peanuts, almonds, walnuts.
(Note: seeds have to be broken open to access it. Grinding is even better)
- Other: Spirulina, white beans, and dairy (milk, yogurt, cottage cheese)

More details here: <https://www.myfooddata.com/articles/high-tyrosine-foods.php>