

Excessive Barking

The science of Animal Learning and Behaviour tells us that behaviour is controlled by environmental conditions (external and internal). So, a dog's barking might be *triggered* by the neighbour's children playing in their yard, a noisy truck rumbling past the property, a hot air balloon flying over, a burglar breaking into your house or because the dog is in pain or suffers from fear or loneliness. Internal conditions are impossible for us to fully understand but we can detect them by watching the dog's behaviour and body language.

In addition to triggers, behaviour is also controlled by *consequences*: A behaviour is likely to occur more often in the future, if it leads to favourable outcomes for the animal (reinforcement), and less often, if the results are not so good (punishment).

Anti-bark collars operate via positive punishment (adding something to the dog's environment to reduce the behaviour of barking). Punishment can be a very effective way to reduce behaviour, so what's so bad about it?

Aversive consequences can create negative associations with any trigger or anything in the environment

The timing and "clean" execution of positive punishment may be easy enough in a laboratory, but there is no guarantee your dog won't form unintended associations when they receive the shock, spray or sound from the anti-bark collar. Anything that the dog may hear, see, smell or otherwise perceive at that time may become associated with the negative experience. The neighbour's children, the cat on the fence, a hot air balloon flying over—anything. Now the dog feels even more motivated to bark when confronted with those elements in the future. Anxious and aggressive behaviour can easily follow.

Aversive consequences can cause apathy, anxiety and aggression

Attempting to block or suppress an individual's behaviour by providing aversive consequences has known risks. Dogs who are happy and confident may become anxious, apathetic or aggressive following the use of anti-bark collars. This can manifest itself only in certain contexts or it can generalise and affect the dog's behaviour in other situations. The frightening part is that dogs who show less behaviour overall, i.e. dogs who become less active or even apathetic, are often labelled "well-behaved" dogs. But a decrease in overall behaviour is not a sign of being well. It's a sign of being mentally or physically ill.

For dogs who bark out of anxiety, for example those who suffer from separation anxiety or noise phobias, the use of aversive consequences can be particularly catastrophic. The collars simply heap more nightmarish experiences onto the dog's already troubled mind.

When an individual is at the mercy of forces they cannot control, their quality of life is seriously compromised.

There is no joy in confusion and frustration

Let's imagine you attend a show by one of your favourite comedians—the type that makes people laugh so hard that their bellies ache and their eyes water. But soon you realize that something is wrong. Every time you laugh out loud, a bug that is stuck deep down in your ear starts buzzing. When you stop laughing, the buzzing stops. You have no way of removing the bug from your ear or squashing it. You try to suppress your laughter to avoid the annoying buzz, but the comedian is just so darn funny, you can't help but burst out laughing. Would that drive you mad?

It depends. Maybe you get used to it after a while and keep laughing out loud. Or maybe it is so frustrating or even painful that you leave the show, see a doctor and get that buzzing bug out of your ear. Lucky you for being able to seek help.

And then there is only panic

Now assume you get yourself trapped in a secret room in a medieval castle and no one knows you're there. You yell out for help when all of a sudden a high-pitched sound causes a sharp pain in your ears. You are momentarily confused why your cries for help would seem to trigger this ear-piercing tone, but your intense fear to be forgotten and die a slow and horrible death in this room is overwhelming. So, you keep screaming at the top of your lungs despite the pain in your ears and you bang on the door until your hands bleed. Finally, with your voice failing, your ears pounding and your fingers broken, you realise that no one is coming to rescue you. You are all alone. Hopefully, by that time you wake up and realise it was all just a bad dream. Lucky you.

If the latter scenario sounds fantastically dramatic, just think: How panic stricken does someone have to be to mutilate their own body? Separation anxiety can do that to a dog. They do not bark for no reason. They are screaming for help.

No matter, if your dog barks out of joy or concern, to talk to other dogs in the neighbourhood, raise the alarm or cry for help, it is a valid expression of their personality and their state of mind. If we simply put a lid on it, we may do a lot more harm than we ever imagined.

How To Reduce Your Dog's Barking Without The Fallout

Make your dog feel safe

If there is any suspicion of *separation anxiety*, address this right away. This is a welfare issue and any attempts to suppress your dog's cries for help will only make matters worse. With the help of our clinic who are experienced in desensitisation protocols for separation anxiety, you can make your dog feel better and remove the reason for their barking.

The same goes for noise phobias or any fear and anxiety related problems. Get help so you can help your dog.

Make your dog's life more interesting

Lack of stimulation is a problem for most dogs who spend too much time alone, especially when there is not much going on in their lives even when you are home. Taking your dog to the park or for a walk before you go out for the day and leaving them with food puzzle toys rather than feeding from a bowl is a good start. However, depending on your dog's individual needs, a 10 minute walk around the block and a toy with dry kibble might not cut it. So, find out what activities it takes to make your dog happy and tired. Sports, games, interactive toys, food puzzles and positive reinforcement training are all good options.

Keep your dog inside

Noises in the neighbourhood are often a trigger for barking. If your dog has noise phobias, this is a serious matter which falls into the same category separation anxiety and requires expert help. Even without a strong fear response, your dog might become distressed or highly aroused from exposure to certain noises. Since, unfortunately, you can't control the world around your home, this means the dog must have access to the house or a place that muffles the outside sounds.

Consider leaving your dog inside while you're out, at least during certain times when specific neighbourhood noises in your area are more likely to occur. Many dogs do much better when they can sleep inside the house during your absence. There are less distractions and they are less likely to be woken up by noises. Leaving the radio on or a white noise machine can help too.

Combine this with increasing your dog's physical and mental stimulation and you have a recipe for success. No need to reach for a gadget that promises you quick relief but doesn't mention the real price you pay.

RESOURCES (in part) - Pierce W.D. and Cheney C.D. 2017, *Behaviour Analysis and Learning. A Biobehavioral Approach*. 6th edn, Routledge, New York

- With other animals
- In front yard
- In back yard
- During daytime
- During night
- Cold weather
- Hot weather
- Chasing something
- You come home
- You're getting ready to go out
- The post person arrives
- Somebody rings the doorbell
- When a storm is coming
- When the children are due home
- At other animals
- When the neighbours come home

5. Which of the following methods have you tried to get your dog to bark less?

- Asking dog to be quiet
- Yelling at dog
- Chasing dog
- Hitting dog
- Getting visitors to hit dog
- Getting visitors to yell at dog
- Stamping your feet
- Growling at dog
- Putting dog on lead
- Putting dog away from the catalyst
- Letting dog come in
- Letting do go out
- Keeping dog inside
- Keeping dog outside
- Muzzling dog
- Praising dog
- Squirting dog
- Citronella collar
- Electronic collar
- Noise emitting collar

6. List any effects (good or bad) that you noticed these methods has on the dog and/or barking:

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7. Does your dog have any health problems?

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8. Has your dog had any bad experiences of any kind?

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9. Please describe how you feel about your dog generally?

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Please be aware I may refer you to a Veterinary Behaviourist if I feel it is in the best interests of you and/or your dog. You can also request a referral to a Veterinary Behaviourist at any time.