

Foster Resources

*If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Foster Department by phone: 410-235-8826 Ext. 147 or by email: foster@mdspca.org.



The Decompression Stage:

Shelters are a very stressful place for any animal. There are lots of strange noises and sounds that they might not be used to – clanging doors, loud talking or music, and other animals. There are strange people in and out all day. A dog or a cat that may have had the run of the house now is confined to a kennel or cage. The shelter environment is also overstimulating. Think of it as listening to rock, hip hop and jazz music at a high decibel level while riding a unicycle, juggling three balls and solving math equations all at once. Some of us might be able to do it but most would not.

The best way to ensure a smooth transition from shelter dog or cat to beloved family pet is to give your new furry friend time to decompress from the stress of shelter life. **Decompression time is the key to having a long and happy life together.**

When people adopt a new pet, especially a dog, the first inclination is to take it everywhere and introduce him to everyone they know. **Now, think of it from the dog's perspective.** You've been kidnapped and taken to a strange place where your whole routine has been replaced by strange people, sounds and food. Nothing is familiar. You stay at this strange place until one day, a man, a woman, a couple, a family come to point at you and say, "We'd like to meet this one." The next thing you know, you are taken to a small room where these strange faces stare at you. They pet you and talk sweet nothings in your ear. They decide it's a match and this thing called "Adoption" happens. You leave the strange place with the strange people and go to another unfamiliar place called "Home." Before you ended up in the shelter, you had a "home" but it wasn't like this home. You don't know what to do. You don't know who these people are.

You don't know what is expected of you. So you try a little of everything. You go to the bathroom outside the house, you go to the bathroom inside the house. You try to climb up on the furniture, you try to sleep on the bed. You eat the food you are served; you don't eat the food you are served. You try to figure out just what it is that they want.

Decompression is basically allowing the animal time to chill out. In the shelter, most animals are at a heightened sense of awareness for a prolonged period of time and that can cause them to crash the first night into a deep sleep. Here are some tips that will help the honeymoon period go smoothly:

1. **GIVE YOUR NEW PET THEIR OWN SPACE** – whether it be a crate or a room of their own, a quiet place to relax is essential. Make it a pleasurable experience for them by playing soft, classical music. Give them lots of high-value treats, such as a Kong stuffed with peanut butter or scratching post to stimulate them mentally. (Remember, when used properly, a crate can create a "den-like" atmosphere for a dog, which is something innate to them.)

2. **STIMULATE ALL THE SENSES BUT DO IT ONE AT A TIME.** Don't invite everyone you know over to meet the new dog or cat. Give them time to get used to your family before allowing them to meet anyone else. Animals have a very powerful sense of smell. Allow them to explore and get used to their new environment before introducing them to resident pets. It is especially important to conduct introductions slowly and over multiple periods of time so that both the new and the resident pet are comfortable with each other. Make each interaction a positive experience for each animal. And never, force an introduction.
3. **KEEP YOUR PET ON A ROUTINIZED SCHEDULE**— Animals look to us for guidance and leadership. Your new pet will not inherently know what is expected of them. It is up to you to teach them. Use high-value treats that will grab their attention and make them want to work for that treat. Never punish an animal, especially after the fact. They won't know what they did wrong and the teaching moment will have passed. Always use positive reinforcement. When your pet does what you want, reward them for that behavior right away so that they connect the two experiences.
4. **USE YOUR TOOLS**— unwanted behaviors can happen in an instant. Keep your dog supervised on a leash while in the house.

Following these simple steps can ensure success for you and your new pet. A two-week shutdown period is typically recommended but some animals will need more time, and some will need less.

Pay attention to the clues your pet is giving you. If they still appear nervous or skittish, wait a little bit longer before introducing them to other experiences. A decompression period is the first step of your long and happy journey together.