

The Bucket

A Petfect guide to trigger stacking — understanding the build-up of stress and helping your dog find their way back to calm.

What is “the bucket”?

We all know the feeling of “the final straw”: a small event pushes us past our limit because of everything that came before it. This cumulative effect is often called trigger stacking.

The bucket is a visual way to think about it. Stressful events — good and bad — pour into a bucket. When it overflows, a very small additional event can cause a big reaction.

Dogs have buckets too. Their size and resting level vary with personality, skills and lived experience.

- A big reaction is not always about the last thing that happened.
- Every dog’s bucket looks different.
- Understanding your own dog is a useful, compassionate starting point.

Look beyond the final straw: what may already be in your dog’s bucket?

What fills the bucket?

Events can be big or small, occasional or constant. Ongoing discomfort, itchy skin, pain or gastrointestinal issues can be like drizzle — always adding a little.

The post arriving, a cat on the fence, a reactive walk, high-energy play, family members coming home, fireworks or a difficult interaction with another dog can all add to the bucket. Positive excitement can add too.

After a stressful event, it may take 72 hours or more for stress hormones to reduce towards a dog's normal baseline.

- Health discomfort and pain.
- Repeated barking at doors, windows or passers-by.
- Overwhelming walks, novelty or social pressure.
- High-arousal activity without enough recovery.

Stress is cumulative. Recovery is part of the plan.

Helping the bucket stay manageable

The good news is that you can reduce what pours into your dog's bucket, help them empty it and build skills to cope with more. A veterinary check is always a valuable first step where health may be involved.

Calmness, sleep, chewing, licking and sniffing all help dogs regulate. Management also matters: reduce rehearsal of barking at the post, limit access to trigger-heavy windows, and make novelty feel safe by pairing it with something your dog enjoys.

- Prioritise sleep, calm and decompression.
- Use chewing, licking and sniffing to support recovery.
- Manage predictable triggers while you teach new skills.
- Build optimism, confidence and disengagement through games.

Tiny, enjoyable games can help you and your dog become teammates again.