



# When You Hit a Training Bump or Wall

By Anne Stocum



We train many behaviors in our dogs as we move through life and sport. Often the process goes quite smoothly. But sometimes we encounter a few bumps in the road, and occasionally we hit a wall and are left scratching our head, frustrated, and feeling defeated. This article is about how you can respond when things go wrong in training so that you continue to work toward a positive outcome. It's about an approach to solving training problems, getting rid of "ego" and dropping notions about what your dog *should* know. It's about being objective and developing a training plan to move forward by adopting a "solution focus." It's about applying one critical question over and over until you see significant change:

"What is the one thing I can do right now to make the situation better?"

To illustrate, let's take a (relatively) simple behavior like an start-line stay. A cue—usually verbal but sometimes combined with a physical cue—is given to the dog to assume a position of sit, down, or stand, and wait for release. During the training process, the dog is reinforced for his response to our cues and learns to ignore distractions, stay for longer periods of time, and do this with the handler at greater distances away while anticipating the excitement of running agility!



During the training process, our mental model goes something like this: Can my dog maintain his stay

- as I walk away.
- as cookies or toys are dropped on the floor in front of him.
- as I run away or fall down.
- as other dogs or people walk or play nearby.
- as I walk 10 ft. away, 20 ft. away, 30 ft. away, 50 ft. away.
- in front of an agility jump while I do all of the above.

The dog is heavily reinforced for the stay with praise, cookies, and play at each stage to communicate to the dog that he is making good choices. Simple. Right?

But what if you go to agility class—or worse, your first trial—and your backyard start-line stay disappears? "All of a sudden" your dog is self-releasing as soon as you walk away, or as you reach your lead-out position, or as another dog walks behind him.

Just as the dog has choices, we as dog trainers, have a choice in how we respond. We can

1. **Respond with frustration (the rant):** “Why is he doing that? I keep having to go back and reset him. I just want to get out there and run the sequence! He’s perfect at home. I don’t understand why he can’t just stay there. He knows this. Why can’t he just sit there?” (Note that this rant may be where a little bit of our ego is getting in the way.)
2. **Accept the dog’s behavior:** “My dog can’t maintain a start-line stay in this exciting environment” and live with the good, the bad, and the ugly of not having a start-line stay. The good is that you no longer have to spend time and energy training the behavior. The bad is you need to figure out how to manage the beginning of courses without a start-line stay. The ugly is that you

will probably get frustrated and eventually punish your dog (at the very least by yelling or stomping around) for not having the behavior you haven’t trained.

3. **Adopt a solution focus:** Step back, objectively analyze the situation, and put a training plan together to strengthen the behavior.

I’m arguing that the third option is the best choice; make the situation better by adopting a solution focus.

### How to Get Started Right Away

- **Step One: Stop the rant.** Stop agonizing over the problem and endlessly describing *what* is going wrong. While it might feel good to complain or vent, it isn’t going to help solve the problem. Worse, the more you think about all the times the dog has failed and the fallout from that failure, the less likely you are to *believe* the problem can be fixed.
- **Step Two: Commit to the need for the behavior.** This is critical because if you don’t believe the behavior is important, you won’t put in the work to train it to fluency. In the start-line stay example, don’t try to convince yourself that you don’t need a start line. There are very few handlers out there who are faster than their dogs and can run from the start line with the dog.
- **Step Three: Adopt a solution focus.** Rather than focusing on the problem, focus on the solution. Even before you take the time to think through the entire training plan, ask yourself: What is one thing I can do right now to make the situation better? For example, if you are in agility class and your dog has repeatedly failed

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**The next time you hit a training bump or a training wall, give solution focus a try. You may be surprised at how much better it makes you feel to focus on the solution rather than the problem!**

at maintaining a start-line stay, the one thing you could do “right now” is to apply the first rule for getting out of a hole: stop digging! Have someone restrain your dog so the mistakes end or eliminate the need for a stay by sending your dog away from the start line to a tunnel or a jump that’s not part of the sequence so that you can get a head start.

Sometimes the honest answer to the question, “What is the one I can do right now to make the situation better?” is “I don’t know.” Don’t accept that answer! Gather more information, study, read, or seek out an expert. Keeping the focus on the solution rather than the problem frees your mental energy to work toward improvement instead of eroding your confidence, leading to more errors and possibly damaging the relationship between you and your dog.

### Start Developing Your Training Plan

Once you are past the training situation where the problem occurred, take the time to evaluate the problem to develop the next steps in your solution-focused training plan for start-line stays:

- **Video record your training sessions.** If you haven’t done this before, you will be amazed at how much you can learn from watching your training sessions. It’s just too difficult to evaluate or remember all that is happening in the moment. For example, maybe your dog is releasing just before you give your verbal cue and you aren’t even aware that is happening. Videotaping will help keep you and your dog honest.

- **Start a training log.** Even if you aren’t a fanatic about record keeping, writing down your short-term training goals and a plan for the next steps can help enormously to get over your current training bump. Include these items: the exercise/skill you are working on, what went well, and what you want to improve. Plus, to help plan for the next training session, answer this question: What is the one thing I can do differently that could lead to the improvement I want?
- **Find out where your dog’s limits are and start from there.** Test the dog against distraction, duration, and distance. Be objective about this. You need to start from the point of success for the dog and build from there. With some dogs, you can build the distractions, duration, or distance quite quickly, but other dogs need you to progress in tiny increments.
- **Evaluate your rewards, reward structure, and reward mechanics.** Does your dog value the reinforcement you are giving him? Are you delivering the cookie or toy in a way that allows the dog to keep his butt on the ground or are you inadvertently training your dog to scooch by delivering the cookie high over his head? Are you only reinforcing when you lead out within 5 ft. but never if you lead out 10 ft.? Are you marking the dog’s good choice to stay *before* you turn around and release the dog or run back to reinforce the dog? If you aren’t doing this, your dog may believe he’ll only get reinforced when you are close to him.



Although this list applies to training a start-line stay, adopting a solution focus can be applied to any dog training or handling skill, including contact behavior, weave poles entries, weave pole exits, front cross execution, course analysis, ring nerves, etc.

The next time you hit a training bump or a training wall, give solution focus a try. You may be surprised at how much better it makes you feel to focus on the solution rather than the problem!

Note: For an in-depth discussion of this topic, read one of my favorite mental management books, *10-Minute Toughness* by Jason Selk. 🐾

#### Success Log

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Exercise/Skill: \_\_\_\_\_

What 3 things went well today?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Based on today, what do I want to improve?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is the one thing I can do differently that could lead to the desired improvement?

Anne Stocum lives in upstate New York and has been involved in dog agility for nearly 20 years. She enjoys teaching all levels of agility and helping teams achieve their best through consistent handling and good dog training that builds a solid foundation, and that is fun for both handler and dog. Over the years, Anne has competed with her Shelties and Border Collies at the local, national, and international level. Anne blogs about agility and dog training and offers online classes at [www.annestocumdogtraining.com](http://www.annestocumdogtraining.com). Contact her at [jstocum@rochester.rr.com](mailto:jstocum@rochester.rr.com).