

Down–stay mat exercises

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Down–stay mat exercises

Many dogs seem eager to play until the lights go out at night. They will rest, but not until they are told to do so. They may engage in problematic behaviours in an attempt to gain attention, particularly while household people try to relax. It is helpful to have a clear cue that indicates that there will be no immediate opportunity to interact. A mat can provide a cue that it is time to settle.

Stage 1: Initial sessions

Sit on the floor (or in a chair very close to your dog).

Down–stay on the mat

1. Ask your dog to ‘down and stay’. Reward the down–stay with tiny treats. Bring the treat to your dog so that he/she can receive the treat without standing up or sitting. Place the treat directly on the mat so that the dog can eat the treat without lifting his/her head.
2. As the dog nibbles, remind him/her to ‘stay; settle’.

Practise this lesson for 10–15 minutes daily, offering very tiny treats periodically as the dog remains in a down–stay position.

Massage on the mat

This exercise must not be used with dogs that behave aggressively when groomed or handled while resting.

1. Ask the dog to ‘down and stay’. Instead of using treats, massage the dog gently to encourage him/her to relax. Use a verbal cue such as ‘settle’.
2. Use gentle touch to encourage the dog to relax for 10–15 minutes.

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Stage 2: Increase distance from dog

Once your dog assumes a relaxed posture upon seeing the mat:

1. Begin these sessions with down–stay or massage.
2. Ask your dog to remain on a ‘settle’ as you sit in a chair next to him/her.
3. Periodically return to reward your dog with a treat or massage; then return to the chair.

Practise for 15 minutes once or twice daily.

Stage 3: Increase distance and time

1. Begin with down–stay or massage.
2. Sit in a chair next to your dog.
3. Sit in a chair farther away.
4. Reduce the frequency with which your dog earns treats or massage.
5. Increase the length of the session gradually and randomly.

Once your dog can lie quietly for 30 minutes with only occasional encouragement, begin to bring out the mat when you need him/her to settle. Provide plenty of exercise, play and training before asking your dog to rest.