



The 3 Stages of Adjustment

This guide is designed for rescues and adoption organisations seeking to adopt ethical, consent-based practices that prioritise emotional safety, individualised care and long-term wellbeing.

Developed by Jo Middleton, cognitive-led canine rehabilitation specialist, the **3 Stages of Adjustment** framework offers a flexible, trauma-informed approach to supporting rescue dogs as they transition into new homes.

Stage 1: Decompression

This is the stage where dogs begin to process their new environment. They may be shut down, hypervigilant, withdrawn, or overly active. Decompression is not about training or bonding - it is about feeling safe enough to rest.

- Create a quiet, predictable space with minimal stimulation.
- Provide ample opportunities for sleep - dogs in transition need up to 18 hours of rest.
- Avoid unnecessary handling or social pressure.
- Let the dog choose when and how to engage.
- Ensure pain is ruled out or treated - book a vet check with attention to dental, musculoskeletal, and digestive health.

Stage 2: Adjustment & Exploration

As the dog begins to feel safer, curiosity returns. Their personality may start to emerge, and behaviours may shift or intensify. This is a critical stage for observation - not correction.

- Reinforce autonomy: offer choice in walks, play, and interaction.
- Begin gentle, relationship-based training using positive reinforcement.
- Prioritise consistent routines for predictability and emotional regulation.
- Use enrichment feeding and decompression walks to support nervous system stability.
- Support emotional needs before addressing behaviour.

Stage 3: Trust & Integration

Over time, the dog begins to relax more deeply into their new home. Trust emerges through micro-moments of consent, choice, and security - not just time. This stage is not about perfection; it's about emotional safety.

- Continue observing body language and respecting consent cues.
- Support rest and recovery during stressful events or life changes.
- Reinforce boundaries through consistency—not force.
- Encourage expression of individual needs, preferences, and play styles.
- Build the relationship at the dog's pace.

This framework is not a timeline - it is a guide for relationship-based support.

Each dog's journey is unique. Adopters, foster carers, and rescues are encouraged to meet dogs where they are, and to offer what all dogs need most: safety, choice, time, and compassion.