



Helping Your Dog Switch Off

Using the body's own "rest and digest" system to help your dog feel calm

Every dog has two gears in their nervous system. One gets them ready for action; the other helps them rest, digest and recover. A dog who struggles to settle is often **stuck in the first gear**. The good news is that there are simple, everyday ways to help them shift into the second.



The accelerator

"Fight or flight"

- Heart beats faster, breathing quickens
- Muscles tense, ready to run or react
- Digestion and sleep put on hold
- Great in an emergency, exhausting all day



The brake

"Rest and digest"

- Heart rate and breathing slow down
- Muscles soften and relax
- Digestion, healing and sleep switch on
- Where learning and recovery happen

Meet the vagus nerve

The **vagus nerve** is the main cable of the "brake" system. It runs from the brain, down through the neck, to the heart, lungs and gut, carrying "it's safe now" messages that slow the body down.

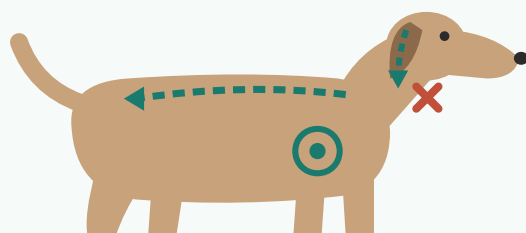
We can't switch it on directly, but many calm, natural activities **encourage the brake to engage**. Page 2 shows you how.

⚠ Can I "stroke the vagus nerve"?

Not directly: it lies **deep in the neck**, beside major blood vessels, not under the skin. **Never press or rub on your dog's throat**, as pressure there can affect the heart. Gentle, slow stroking elsewhere is what helps, and only when your dog wants it.

Signs your dog is switching off

	What you might see
Face	Soft eyes, slow blinks, heavy eyelids, a loose, relaxed mouth
Body	Muscles "melting", lying flat on their side, a big sigh , slower, deeper breathing
Afterwards	A stretch, a shake-off as if wet, then settling or falling asleep



--- Slow strokes ○ Resting hand ✗ Not the throat

Where calm touch helps

Long, slow strokes along the back and sides, gentle strokes from the base of the ear to the tip, or a still, flat hand resting on the side of the chest.

Keep well away from the **throat and front of the neck**. Most dogs dislike being touched there anyway.



Ways to Help the Brave Engage

Simple, natural activities that tell your dog's body "it's safe now"

Sniffing

Slow, steady sniffing naturally steadies breathing and calms the body. Try a **sniffy walk** at your dog's pace, scatter food in the grass, or set up a **Free Work** session at home.

Licking and chewing

Rhythmic licking and chewing are self-soothing. A **lick mat**, a suitable chew or a stuffed food toy after a busy time can help your dog wind down.

Slow, calm touch

- **Ask first.** Offer your hand and let your dog lean in. If they move away, respect it.
- **Slow and long:** gentle strokes along the body, following the coat, about one stroke every few seconds.
- **Ears:** slow, soft strokes from the base of the ear to the tip are calming for many dogs.
- **A still hand:** resting a flat, warm hand on the side of the chest can be soothing.
- **Avoid fast patting** and ruffling. It feels exciting, not calming.
- **Pause often.** If your dog stays, nudges or melts into you, carry on.

Rest and sleep

Dogs need **far more sleep than we do**: many adults need 12 hours or more a day, puppies and older dogs even more. A quiet, comfortable bed away from busy areas protects that rest.

Your own calm

Dogs are very sensitive to our mood. **Slow your own breathing**, soften your voice and move calmly. Sitting quietly nearby can help your dog settle more than words or fuss.

When to use these

Moment	Try
After a walk	A few minutes of sniffing or a lick mat, then quiet time on their bed
After a scare	Space first , then sniffing or a chew once they've recovered enough to take it
Before bedtime	A calm routine: a gentle sniff in the garden, slow strokes if wanted, lights low
Busy days	Build in recovery time between events, so the stress bucket can drain

If your dog is too worried to sniff, lick or take food, they need more space and time first. Calm can't be forced; it can only be invited.