My guess is that most agility addicts get adrenaline rushes when they do agility. So why can some handlers make the effects of the adrenaline work for them while so many other handlers fall victim to it? It is easy to see the focus and control of top handlers and the panic, what I call "hair on fire" handling, in so many others. I see so many perfectly capable handlers running well-trained dogs who are unable to meet their goals because they can't keep their wits about them. Frantic handling is never pretty and rarely ends well. When the effects of adrenaline get out of hand, everything and anything can and will go wrong.

Ask Yourself

Does your adrenaline rush help you succeed in agility?

When you step to the line are you able to channel that rapid heartbeat and excitement into pure focus? Are you able to keep your wits about you and execute your well-designed plan? Do you feel in control of your body and actions while you are running a sequence in class or a course at a trial? Can you keep your composure when things are *not* going according to plan?

or

Does your adrenaline rush cause you to fail?

When you step to the line does that rapid heartbeat rattle you and cause you to doubt yourself? When you are on course does your brain have trouble keeping up with your dog? Does panic cause your mind to go blank? Or do you choke because everything you ever learned about handling is pouring into your head all at once, making it impossible for you to react as you want to?

If your adrenaline rush facilitates you getting into "the zone," you are probably reaching your agility goals and possibly enjoying the sport a bit more than those who are being traumatized by the effects of adrenaline and nerves. If the zone isn't greeting you at the start line, recognizing what adrenaline rushes do to your body can give you critical insight to help you better your performance.

The Bad Stuff

Some unwanted effects you might have experienced during an adrenaline rush:

- You are not in control of your body—arms flail, feet get stuck in place, hips rotate late, and your voice goes up and up in both volume and pitch.
- You are not in control of your brain—you end up in the wrong place, on the wrong side of something (dog, obstacle, path), or at the wrong obstacle entirely. You begin the "Hail Mary handling," the dreaded "make it up as you go and hope for the best" strategy.
- You can't react appropriately when something isn't going right. You or the dog (think dropped bar) make a tiny error that either could have been "saved" or no longer matters. But you can't dismiss what no longer matters and keep up your handling, and you can't fight to save what could have been saved. The brain won't react; the body has no hope.

Practice keeping your head together (composure)—keep your mind on the task at hand as you handle. Focus on what you are doing, not how well you are doing it.

Not only does all of this feel bad, it usually makes the dog do one of two things: slow down and turn off, or speed up and make his own choices. Neither is good.

Shouldn't It Be Easy?

You can spend years perfecting obstacle performance and thousands of dollars studying with the best instructors in the world, but if you can't control yourself when the adrenaline kicks in, you will not be able to perform at your best. It seems like we should all be able to control ourselves just by deciding to do it, but it isn't that easy.

What is easy, and can be helpful, is to gain an understanding of what happens in your body when it is awash in adrenaline and cortisol.

I wanted to help my students who were having adrenaline get the better of them, so I did some reading on the subject. Adrenaline is a hormone produced by the adrenal glands during high stress or exciting situations, like agility trials. There are both physical and psychological changes that occur in your body when adrenaline and cortisol "rush" you. You are being prepared to fight (execute the course like a warrior), flee (as in panic, if you are not equipped to "fight"), or, in our case, handle well.

Emergency Procedures

This information got me thinking. I noticed that many of my students were highly skilled professionals (surgeons, lawyers, and nurses in emergency rooms) as well as (even better yet) parents. No parent has escaped the experience of having to deal with an injured child. Talk about adrenaline!

I believe most of my students are capable of being rock stars in a crisis when they have to be. So I asked them this: "If you walked out the door right now and there was a car accident with injured people, I bet you would bring your brain into focus quickly and think of some very smart things to do. I want you to do that now on this course."

I ask them to notice when the adrenaline rush starts and face it head on just as they would in a real emergency. I ask them to force themselves to focus on the task at hand and block out everything else.

Remember, some level of experience and training has to be in place to tackle any task, especially in an emergency. It is the combination of experience, training, and the ability to physically and psychologically control yourself in high-stress situations that is the key to success in agility. Understanding and controlling yourself during an adrenaline rush is part of your agility training, and it must be practiced. This is something any emergency caregiver, police officer, or soldier is familiar with.

What You Can Do

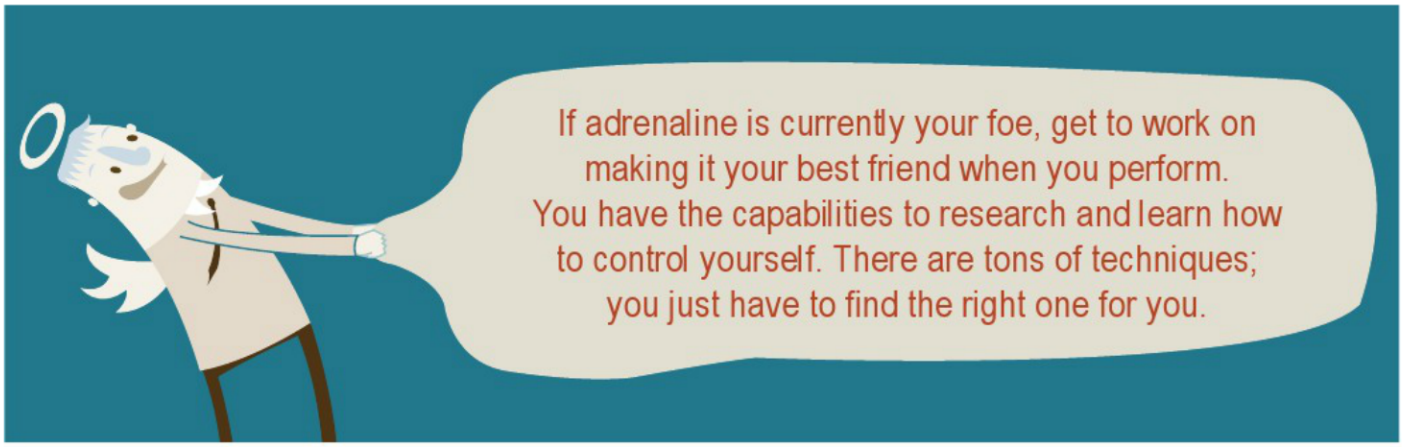
Here are some ways to start tackling your runaway adrenaline rushes:

- Learn to recognize the signs immediately—notice when the rush starts and then call it what it is, "There you are, my little adrenaline friend." Make it familiar to you.
- Remember that you can benefit from adrenaline—winners get adrenaline rushes! It can provide you with a wonderful energy. The excitement it generates can improve your focus and make you perform at your very best.
- Recall an emergency—remember a time when you acted like a rock star and responded effectively when things around you were chaotic and uncertain. If you could do that then, you can do it on the agility course.
- Practice keeping your head together (composure)—keep your mind on the task at hand as you handle. Focus on what you are doing, not how well you are doing it.

Reproducing the Effects of an Adrenaline Rush

Another way to get a handle on this issue is to include adrenaline in your regular practice sessions. Do this in a manageable way so that you have success. Try these easy-to-do adrenaline-rush scale tippers:

- Bring out the stopwatch in class. This is a great cage-rattler, so have some real fun with it. Enjoying yourself when the stakes get raised can be difficult, but with practice you can do it.
- Have your instructor use a whistle when you go off course (only on occasion, as it can diminish the love between student and instructor!).
- Ask someone in class to act as a gate steward, yelling out the names over and over (again, in small doses).
- Go to matches! We know we have to get the dogs used to new places to test the training waters, but what about us? Use your time at matches to do more than train your dog; train yourself!
- Ask someone you respect to come and watch you at class. This can be very unnerving. Choose the person carefully; remember we are trying for success here.



- Imagine you are at a trial. Do this as you walk to the line and as you lead out. This is my favorite strategy. I can actually cause my breath to shorten and make my heart race if I imagine handling a team run at an international event. Then I can practice pulling my thoughts back to the task at hand—the lead-out and the course.
- Talk to your doctor. You may want to explore a class of drugs called beta blockers. When they do their job, they weaken the effects of stress hormones while leaving your mind unaffected. Many actors use them to control their nerves.

Break Downs in Trial Behavior

The more I focused on adrenaline and its effect on my students, the more places I looked for its influence. I now believe it is a critical link to behaviors breaking down in competition.

I'm always looking for answers as to why well-trained behaviors fall apart in the trial environment. I wrote an article for *Clean Run* in November 2004 called "Ring Wiser." It was about hows and whys that every handler should know when it comes to maintaining behaviors during their dog's agility career. There is much to consider just from a training standpoint. But the one thing I missed back then was the very real difference between how adrenaline affects us when we're just training and how it affects us when we're trialing.

In class, when the handler decides to stop and reward the dog, the intensity usually escapes, like the air going out of a balloon. The handler takes a breath, relaxes a bit, and moseys over for the cookie or toy delivery. The dog (not all of them, of course) also has a bit of an intensity break, albeit a very short one. This can happen several times in one run. Adrenaline in full swing, then a break happens for a reward, then back to full swing until the next "break" (reward). Even after a good tug game, the handler usually regroups with a tiny mini-mental break before going back to the course work.

In a trial, the adrenaline is "on" for the entire run in both the dog (not all of them, of course) and the handler (most, I would say). This constant surge of adrenaline can tip the scale of control for the dog, just as it can for us humans.

The answer, as you might think, is not to withhold rewards in training. Running full courses without any reward (when your dog is ready for it) can be an occasional part of this puzzle's answer, but the larger part is keeping the adrenaline at full tilt when you are rewarding and proofing behavior. For example, when training contacts, you can dash in, sound excited, reward, and dash back out—repeating just enough to build excitement, but not so much that you overwhelm your dog. In doing this, you will see how some seemingly well-trained dogs can't handle the constant full-throttle adrenaline in practice any better than they can at the trial. The effects of the adrenaline cause them to not think or be able to remember what they "know," just as it does us. Think of it like that the next time you tell someone your dog "blew you off." Maybe he was just having trouble with his adrenaline rush and needs more practice performing with more adrenaline.

If adrenaline is currently your foe, get to work on making it your best friend when you perform. You have the capabilities to research and learn how to control yourself. There are tons of techniques; you just have to find the right one for you.

Sandy Rogers has been teaching obedience and agility since 1991. She founded ACE Dog Sports in San Francisco, California in 1999. Her dogs have competed in all the USDAA and AKC National Championship finals multiple times in four jump heights. Sandy and Jack Russell Terrier Quill competed on Team USA at the World Agility Open in 2011, 2012, and 2013. They won the individual gold and silver medals in 2012 and bronze in 2013. Quill won the USDAA Grand Prix in 2013, placed third in 2007, and placed second at the 2012 and 2014 AKC Nationals. Border Collie Brink placed third in the Grand Prix in 2000 and won 16" Speed Jumping in 2007 and 2008 and Performance Grand Prix in 2007. Sandy has two DVDs available: Training the Extreme Dogs and One Jump Two Jump.