The Zones Approach – a new way of working with dogs

The Reactivity Zones Approach™ (RZA) is a holistic framework that shifts the focus away from the dog and to their interaction with the environment. Rather than labeling a dog as inherently reactive, this approach focuses on environmental influences and the friction between the dog and those influences. By categorizing a dog's experience into three distinct Zones - Comfort, Tolerance, and Discomfort - RZA provides practical, real-world strategies that move beyond traditional desensitization and counter-conditioning protocols to build genuine resilience and emotional safety. While RZA is useful for helping dogs with reactivity, the Zones Approach can be used by staff and volunteers in shelters and vet offices, by dog walkers, groomers, pet sitters and other animal care professionals.

In this presentation, attendees with learn to:

- Identify the three zones and accurately recognize a dog's emotional state—Comfort (relaxed/learning), Tolerance (hypervigilant/coping), or Discomfort (overwhelmed/reacting).
- Examine environmental interaction and evaluate behavior based on the friction between dogs and their surroundings and not the dog's character.
- Understand and analyze why desensitization and counter conditioning protocols are fragile.
- Apply zone-specific skills and execute practical safety and exit strategies for the Discomfort Zone while mastering techniques to move efficiently through the Tolerance Zone.
- Foster resilience through Comfort and develop plans that prioritize expanding the Comfort Zone to create lasting emotional change and confidence.
- Empathize with the dog/human experience and advocate for their needs by respecting current feelings and providing agency rather than forcing compliance.
- Apply the Zones Approach in their work across the animal care industry.