

Signs Your Dog is Stressed and How to Relieve It

Stress is a commonly used word that describes feelings of strain or pressure. The causes of stress are exceedingly varied. Perhaps you are stressed out by your job, you become nervous when meeting new people, or you get anxious when your daily routine is disrupted.

To reduce stress levels, you may seek comfort in several ways. Maybe you find solace in the company of a trusted friend. Perhaps you calm down when occupied by routine chores like cleaning the house. Or maybe you blow off some steam with physical exercise.



"Our furry friends can become stressed, too"

Our furry friends can become stressed, too. Since we can understand how stress makes *us* feel, we certainly want to help alleviate our pet's stress as well. However, our dogs don't voice their feelings, slam down the phone or throw a tantrum, so how can we tell they are stressed? The signs of canine anxiety are often subtle. In fact, some stress-related behaviors mimic normal canine antics, so here are a few clues that may indicate that your dog's stress level is elevated.

Top Ten Indicators of Stress in Dogs

1. **Pacing or shaking.** You've seen your dog shake after a bath or a roll in the grass. That whole body shake can be amusing and is quite normal...unless it's a result of a stressful situation. For example, dogs are commonly stressed out when visiting the veterinarian, much like their owners are when going to a human medical doctor. Many dogs "shake it off" when they descend from the exam table and touch down on terra firma. Dogs, like people, also pace when agitated. Some dogs walk a repeated path around the exam room while waiting for the doctor.
2. **Whining or barking.** Vocalization is normal canine self-expression, but may be intensified under duress. Dogs that are afraid or tense may whine or bark to get your attention, or to self soothe.
3. **Yawning, drooling and licking.** Dogs yawn when they are tired or bored, but did you know that they also yawn when stressed? A stressful yawn is more prolonged and intense than a sleepy yawn. Dogs may also drool and lick excessively when nervous.
4. **Changes in eyes and ears.** Stressed dogs, like stressed people, may have dilated pupils and blink rapidly. They may open their eyes really wide and show more sclera (white) than usual, giving them a startled appearance. Ears that are usually relaxed or alert are pinned back against the head.
5. **Changes in body posture.** Dogs normally bear even weight on all four legs. If a healthy dog with no orthopedic problems shifts his weight to his rear legs or cowers, he may be exhibiting stress. When scared, dogs may also tuck their tails or become quite rigid.

6. **Shedding.** Show dogs that become nervous in the show ring often “blow their coat”. Dogs also shed a lot when in the veterinary clinic. Although less noticeable in outside settings, such as visiting a new dog park, shedding increases when a dog is anxious.
7. **Panting.** Dogs pant when hot, excited or stressed. So, if your dog is panting even though she hasn’t jogged 10 miles in the heat of summer, she may be frazzled.
8. **Changes in bodily functions.** Like people, nervous dogs can feel a sudden urge to go to the bathroom. When your dog urinates shortly after meeting a new canine friend, he may be marking territory and reacting to the strain simultaneously. Refusal of food and loss of bowel function are also stress indicators.
9. **Avoidance or displacement behavior.** When faced with an unwelcome situation, dogs may “escape” by focusing on something else. They may sniff the ground, lick their genitals, or simply turn away. Ignoring someone may not be polite, but it’s surely better than being aggressive. If your dog avoids interaction with other dogs or people, don’t force the issue. Respect his choice.
10. **Hiding or Escape behavior.** An extension of avoidance, some tense dogs literally move behind their owners to hide. They may even nudge their owners to prompt them to move along. As a means of escape, they may engage in diversion activities such as digging or circling, or may slink behind a tree or parked car.

How to Handle Stress

In order to differentiate stress signs from normal behavior, you must be familiar with your dog’s regular demeanor. Then you can tell if he’s licking his lips because he’s anxious or because he wants a treat!

When relaxed, he will have semi-erect or forward facing ears, a soft mouth, and round eyes. He will distribute his weight evenly on all four paws. Distinguishing normal behavior from stress signs will help you quickly and effectively diffuse an uncomfortable situation.

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If your dog is stressed, first remove him from the stressor. Find a quiet place for him to regroup. Resist the urge to overly comfort him. This will only confirm that his fears are justified and may make him less confident in the future. If you want to pamper him with petting or treats, make him earn them first by performing a routing activity, i.e. sitting. Responding to routine commands distracts the dog and provides a sense of normalcy. It’s amazing how comforting sit, down, and heel can be to a worried dog.

"If your dog becomes consistently stressed, see your veterinarian."

If your dog becomes consistently stressed, see your veterinarian. After ensuring that your dog’s behavior does not have a medical basis, your dog’s doctor may refer you to a trainer or veterinary behaviorist to evaluate stress-related issues.

As with humans, exercise can be a great stress reducer. Physical activities like walking or playing fetch help both you and your dog release tension. It’s also good to provide your dog with a safe place in the home where he can escape anxious situations. Everybody enjoys a calm place to retreat.

And, finally, remember that stress isn't always bad. Fear is a stress-related emotion that prompts us to avoid potentially dangerous situations. So, stress may actually be a protector. Regardless, stress is part of everyday life for us and our dogs, so we should learn how best to deal with it.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Lynn Buzhardt, DVM

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