

Stress Indicators

When one or more of the following behaviors/body postures is observed in the dog, it often indicates stress. The context of the behavior is an important clue to whether the behavior is stress-related or due to another stimulus. When looking at stress signals, remember that stress-like behavior can also be indicative of other concerns such as a medical problem or it may be a learned behavior. In some instances the indicator may simply be a breed-specific quality. (For example, whippets have a naturally low tail carriage.)

Stress is dynamic. It changes from moment to moment and within each new situation. Levels of stress can vary dramatically from dog to dog and situation to situation. Not all stress is counter-productive however. Small amounts of stress can enhance awareness and performance.

Rapid shallow or deep forceful panting: Panting is normal for dogs that have been exercising or are hot. So-called “normal” panting is done with deeper respirations with a relaxed tongue. When a stressed dog pants, the lips will be pulled back in a wide grin, causing furrows in the skin under the eyes and on the forehead.

Lack of focus or attention: If your dog fails to respond to known cues, he may simply be distracted by a stimulus such as a squirrel. He may also be stressed. When stressed, the dog is not ignoring you; he simply cannot respond to you. He may hear you perfectly well, but his mind is unable to process the information. (Sometimes we find ourselves so stressed that even the simplest task is impossible for us to do!)

Avoidance: The dog may turn away, shut down or run and dodge from us.

Sweaty paws: Dogs get sweaty paws when stressed in the same manner that people get sweaty palms. This reaction is often visible on hardwood floors or metal tables at the vet.

Yawning: Yawning is one of the most common signs of stress. Stress-related yawns will be more intense than “sleepy” yawns. The dog may be in an excited vs. relaxed state when yawning.

Increase frequency of urination or defecation: A stressed body will try to force fluids out of the system. Some “house training” issues owners report are stress related. Inappropriate spontaneous voiding is an indicator of extreme stress.

Vomiting & diarrhea: The digestive system is often the first system to react to stress.

Drooling: Usually indicates stress in the absence of a mouth injury or in anticipation of food.

Stretching: Stretching is a way to relax the muscles that tense from stress. This type of stretching is not related to sleeping or from staying in one position for a long period of time.

Shaking: You may see a full body shake when the dog is not wet.

Confusion: Strange, abnormal or confused behavior can be the result of stress. Exercise caution when interpreting this behavior as it can also indicate a medical problem like a seizure or diabetic emergency.

Self-mutilation: Tail chewing, paw licking and chewing or sucking on the flank may be signs of stress, although the behaviors may have medical origins.

Excessive grooming: A dog that constantly is licking himself is showing signs of stress. Common sites for excessively licking are paws, legs, flanks and genital areas.

Sleeping excessively: Every dog has a different energy level so excessive sleeping may be difficult to recognize. This is a sign of chronic stress, shutting down and serotonin depletion.

Immune system disorder: Stress lowers the immune system response to diseases and allergies.

Excessive thirst: Increased drinking without a medical or exercise-related cause. This could be a sign of redirected frustration or an obsessive disorder.

Stiffness: Tension can create stiff gait and tail movement.

Shivering: Many dogs will shiver when under stress. If the dog is not cold, consider stress as a cause.

Whining: Due to anxiety or excitability.

Low body carriage: Dogs that move low to the ground on tiptoe are often exhibiting stress.

Mouthiness: Mouthiness may range from gentle mouthing to snapping or biting.

Hyperactivity: Stress may trigger a defense mechanism that can look frantic. Often this is interpreted as the dog defying the owner or “fooling around”. The dog will eventually shut down when his system is drained.

Displacement Behaviors: (common responses that can be misinterpreted)

- Licking nose
- Yawning
- Sniffing the ground
- Scratching
- Shaking
- Blinking
- Lip smack
- Aggression

Calming / Appeasement Signals: Dogs use calming signals with each other to defuse a stressful situation. These appeasement signals DO have a communicative function to reduce the arousal level of the other dog or calm the dog down.

- Turning the head away or averting the eyes
- Turning completely away
- Sniffing at the ground (very common)
- Quick (often lizard like) licking of the lips
- Freezing in place
- Moving excruciatingly slowly
- Sitting or laying down
- Play bow position
- Yawning