

There is no doubt that life for dogs can be stressful. Even in our homes, noise, the activity level, changes in routine, change in diet, new sights and smells; all of these can provide challenges for our dogs. While stress can never be eliminated completely, there are many ways of reducing or minimizing its effect on animals. It is important to remember that every animal, (the same holds true for us!) has a different threshold for stress and different ways of coping with it. It is also important to remember that stress drives any "aggressive" type of behavior as well as any type of "fearful" behavior.

What is Stress? Stress occurs when any demand is placed upon a dog to change or adjust. Stress can be internal or external, biological or psychological.

Signs and Symptoms of Stress*

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| dilated pupils | furrowed brow (looking "worried") |
| fixated stare | "whale" eye |
| panting - large, open mouth, shallow | thick, velvety tongue |
| yawning | lip licking (short snake-like) |
| flushed ears | whining (esp.high, repetitive) |
| shedding / dry, flaky skin | pacing, circling, jumping |
| scratching | repetitive motion |
| sweaty paws | frozen posture, trembling |
| veins pronounced around muzzle | hard, tense (not muscular) body |
| rough mouth (taking treats) | shaking / trembling |
| "hard" eye | lack of overt signs of friendliness |
| bristling whiskers | furtive glances |
| salivating / drooling | tail shift / off to one side |
| high pitched barking | increased / decreased activity |
| self mutilation /excessive grooming | frequent urination |
| diarrhea / vomiting | stretching |

Stress Threshold - The upper limit at which the stressor exceeds the dog's ability to tolerate or cope with it.

Acute vs. Chronic - short term vs. long term

The more chronic a dog's level of stress is, the less they are able to cope with additional stressors and the more practiced their response becomes.

Behavioral Responses to Crossing Stress Threshold

Fight - dog who reacts offensively

Flight - dog who reacts defensively but may become offensive if cornered

Freeze - frozen posture (this isn't happening to me) - often with fixated stare

Faint - "if I just go to sleep this will all go away"

Fool Around - mouthing, playing, getting goofy

Why is it important to know how a dog responds to stress? To help both of you be more successful in training, learning, modifying behavior and responses in your dog. The more aware you are of your dog's responses to stress, the more proactive you can be in setting him/her up for success in the way you handle the situation. Proactive is always better than reactive.

Proactive = anticipating a problem and actively engaging both of you in a behavior that avoids or minimizes an incident.

Reactive = Crisis management - an incident has occurred and you need to get out of the situation as quickly as possible.

Are these behavioral responses learned or genetic?

They are a combination of both. Ex: Your dog may have learned that nipping gets dogs or people out of his space, but he still requires the genetic predisposition to act on his feelings. (fight vs. flight).

What about the brain? Limbic vs. Cerebral Cortex.

The dog's limbic system is responsible for processing emotions. The cerebral cortex is responsible for thinking, problem solving and learning. When doing any type of behavior modification, it is important to keep your dog "thinking" rather than "feeling" as much as possible. This is accomplished through leadership exercises, redirection and training.

Reducing Stress - Handling

- * 25% of all bites occur when reaching for and moving by dogs the collar. Use your leash or Gentle Leader to move your dog as much as possible.
- * Move calmly, confidently, and happily. Use a treat, toy, obedience or your happy voice to give your dog something to focus on and to stay in "thinking" mode rather than feeling nervous. Remember, anything you are feeling will go right down the leash to your dog.
- * Regular exercise - a tired dog is a better behaved dog.
- * Slow, calm, smooth strokes when petting - not patting or fast movement.