



# Stressed Out

*Why you should care whether your dog is chronically stressed, how you can tell – and what you can do about it.*



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*Lots of people joke about how they would like to have their dog's life – no job, sleeping all day, having food delivered... but the truth is, that life can be very stressful for a dog! Dogs evolved to live in groups, not staying alone all day. Being subjected to our unpredictable schedules, often without so much as the ability to go outside to relieve themselves when they want to, can actually cause a lot of stress in some dogs.*

**S**tress is not specific to humans – it affects all species, including our dogs, and it takes a toll on every living thing that it affects. The growth rate and production of plants decreases when they are stressed by unseasonal weather. Bees sting when they are stressed by threats to their hive. Humans get ulcers, are more susceptible to illness, and are more likely to lash out at other humans (or our pets!) when stressed.

As kindred mammals, the dog's response to stress is very similar to our own: It can make them sick, and it can affect their behavior in ways that no one around them enjoys. It behooves us, as well as our dogs, to recognize the stressors in our shared lives and do our best to minimize them.

## WHY STRESS IS BAD

There are two kinds of stress. “Good” stress, known as eustress, can actually enhance our lives (“eu” is Greek for “good”). Eustress is defined as: “The positive cognitive response to stress that is healthy, or gives one a feeling of

fulfillment or other positive feelings.” This is the stress you feel getting ready for a promising date, or waiting to go pick up your new puppy. It's the stress your dog feels when she hears your car turn into the driveway gets happy and excited because you're home after you've been away at work all day. We're not worried about eustress – ours, or our dogs'.

What we're concerned about is the “bad” stress, technically called distress, and defined as: “Psychological discomfort that interferes with your (or your dog's) activities of daily living.” If you've lived with a dog or dogs for any length

of time, you have probably seen some of the signs of their distress (we'll just call it “stress” for the rest of the article). Here are a few you may have seen:

- Tension and trembling on the exam table at the vet hospital
- Hackles raised and growling at the UPS delivery person
- Hiding in the back bedroom when guests are visiting
- Crawling behind the toilet when a thunderstorm hits
- Drooling or foamy mouth at the dog-park

The list could go on for pages, but you get the idea. So why is stress such a bad thing? For starters, a huge percentage of what is perceived as canine “misbehavior” is actually

a dog's response to stress. Eliminate the stress in your dog's world and you might be amazed at how much better behaved she is.

The other significant reason stress is bad is that it affects your dog's physical health. It is well known that anxieties trigger the release of stress hormones – adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine – and chronically increased levels of these hormones can negatively impact the immune system. A compromised immune system makes your dog more susceptible to a variety of infectious diseases as well as serious long-term health issues, including cancer. A 2016 study suggests that dogs who are diagnosed with cancer are significantly more likely to have lived in stressful environments than those who are cancer-free.<sup>1</sup>

## CAUSES OF STRESS

There's no end to the things that *can* stress your dog – but some are more common than others. Life with humans can challenge dogs in a number of common ways, including:

■ **Change.** Life changes are stressful for all of us. For your dog, this can be something as small as a change in routine (such as when daylight savings time changes mealtimes) or as significant as the loss of a human or canine companion. Moving is another big stressor that often results in unwanted canine behavioral changes (although a move that removes stressors can be a good thing!).

### ■ Presence of an aversive stimulus.

An aversive stimulus is defined as “an unpleasant stimulus that induces changes in behavior.” If your dog doesn't like or is afraid of other dogs (or men, or children, etc.), the presence of another dog (men, children) is an aversive stimulus. If your dog is sound-sensitive, thunder, fireworks, a pan dropping on the floor or even the “ding” from a microwave oven could be aversive stimuli. The greater the intensity of an aversive stimulus – more dogs, dog(s) closer in proximity, louder volume of sound, repetition of the sound, etc., the more stressful it is to your dog.

■ **Forced restraint.** Many dogs prefer not to be restrained – and some find it very stressful. Forced restraint most often occurs during husbandry procedures – veterinary visits, grooming, nail trimming, etc. The shift toward cooperative care in the veterinary, grooming, and training communities is a change that will be appreciated by many dogs (and their humans). (See “Fear Free Veterinary Care,” WDJ August 2019, and “Fear Free Vet Visits,” December 2015.)

■ **Force-based training.** By definition, force-based training involves the use of techniques that are aversive to the dog – usually both verbal and physical force and coercion. These are significant stressors for dogs, and studies support the position that dogs trained with

these methods are considerably more stressed and exhibit more problem behaviors than dogs trained with force-free methods.<sup>2</sup>

■ **Medical conditions.** Whether illness or pain (chronic or acute), medical issues are extremely significant stressors. This is why it's critically important to rule out or identify and treat medical issues as soon as possible in a behavior modification program. You are likely to still have to do behavior modification after the condition is treated or managed, but your likelihood of success is greatly enhanced when you remove the medical stressor.

■ **Owner stress.** We have long known that dogs are very aware of their humans' emotional states. A recent study supports our also long-held belief that dogs mirror their owners' stress levels. If you are stressed, you are stressing your own dog, so mitigating your own stress can be beneficial to your dog as well as to you!<sup>3</sup>

This is by no means a complete list of stressors. It will behoove you – and your dog – for you to sit down and make as complete a list as you can of your dog's own personal stressors, so that you can begin to address them and help you and your dog have a better life together. (See “Reducing Your Dog's Stress,” page 15.)

## SIGNS OF CANINE STRESS

If you are not fluent in canine communication, it's time to study the language so you can better understand your dog and be prepared to help her when she needs it the most. Here are some of the common signs you might see that tell you your dog is stressed:

■ **Aggression.** With one very rare exception (idiopathic aggression), aggression is caused by stress. The best thing you can do for aggressive behavior is reduce stress. The worst thing you can do is punish the dog, which merely adds stress to your

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> “Stress and cancer in dogs: Comparison between a population of dogs diagnosed with cancer and a control population – A pilot study,” by S Cannas, GV Berteselli, P Piotti, Z Talamonti, E Scaglia, D Stefanello, M Minero, C Palestini, published in *Macedonian Veterinary Review* (2016, 39 (2): 201 - 208 ). You can read it for free at [tinyurl.com/WDJ-stress-and-cancer](https://tinyurl.com/WDJ-stress-and-cancer).

<sup>2</sup> “Dog training methods: Their use, effectiveness, and interaction with behaviour and welfare,” by EF Hiby, NJ Rooney, JWS Bradshaw, published in *Animal Welfare* (2004, 13: 63-69). You can read it for free at [tinyurl.com/WDJ-training-methods](https://tinyurl.com/WDJ-training-methods).

<sup>3</sup> “Long-term stress levels are synchronized in dogs and their owners,” by Ann-Sofie Sundman, Enya Van Poucke, Ann-Charlotte Svensson Holm, Åshild Faresjö, Elvar Theodorsson, Per Jensen, Lina S. V. Roth, published in *Scientific Reports* (2019). You can read it for free at [tinyurl.com/WDJ-synchronized-stress](https://tinyurl.com/WDJ-synchronized-stress).

already stressed dog. (See “Good Growling,” December 2016.)

■ **Vocalization.** Dogs vocalize for a long list of reasons. Vocalization is normal canine self-expression, but it may intensify under duress. Dogs who are afraid or tense may whine or bark to get your attention or to self-soothe.

Dogs with separation anxiety may bark or scream for hours. Your dog may howl to express her unhappiness, or because the fire truck is going by with sirens blaring. When your dog vocalizes, check to determine the trigger. If it’s from stress, it needs to be addressed to mitigate her emotional distress, whatever the cause. (See “Oh Shush,” March 2017.)

■ **Destructive behavior.** Left unsupervised, puppies can wreak havoc on a home in almost no time. That’s often just normal puppy behavior. When an adult dog is destructive, we tend to think she’s being a “bad dog.” In many cases, however, she’s destroying things because she’s in a stress-related panic. Reduce her stress, and you’re likely to see a significant behavior change.

■ **Unusual elimination.** Just as with anxious humans, nervous dogs can feel a sudden urge to go to the bathroom. House-soiling in an otherwise well housetrained dog is a big red stress-flag. Marking (especially indoor marking) is commonly a function of stress rather than a housetraining issue. Diarrhea can be a sign of stress, and the sudden release of bladder and/or bowels can also indicate significant stress. (These can also be medical issues, so be sure to discuss with your veterinarian.)

■ **Not eating/losing weight.** If your dog turns up her nose at your high-value treats during a counter-conditioning session, she is probably stressed because the aversive stimulus (the thing you are trying to change her response to) is too close or otherwise too intense. Move farther away or otherwise reduce the intensity of the stimulus (by decreasing its volume or

movement, as appropriate). If a dog with an otherwise good appetite isn’t eating well, consider illness first and consult your vet, but don’t rule out generalized stress.

■ **Avoidance, escape, and displacement behaviors.** When faced with an unwelcome situation, your dog may “escape” by focusing on something else. She may sniff the ground, lick her genitals, suddenly start scratching an itch, avoid eye contact, or simply turn away. If your dog avoids interaction with other dogs or people, don’t force the issue. Respect her choice.

Some dogs will move behind their human to hide – an extension of avoidance. Other escape behaviors include displacement activities such as moving/running away, digging or circling, or hiding behind a tree or parked car.

■ **Hypervigilance.** The dog who can’t seem to settle, is always on alert, reacting to every noise or change in the environment, is very likely a stressed dog. This behavior is common with dogs who are identified as having generalized anxiety disorder – they rarely or never relax.

■ **Stressed body language.** There are a multitude of ways that dogs tell us they are stressed, with their eyes, ears, tails, faces, mouths, and body posture. In fact, your dog is talking to you all the time; be sure to “listen” with your eyes. (See “Listen by Looking,” August 2011, and “About Face,” March 2013)

■ **Comfort-seeking.** Your stressed dog may seek you out for comfort and reassurance. Contrary to an unfortunate popular myth, it is okay – no, it is good – to calmly comfort and reassure your stressed dog. A stressed, frightened dog may also tremble – again, provide calm comfort and reassurance.

■ **Yawning, drooling, licking, scratching.** Of course, dogs yawn when they are tired or bored, just like

we do. They also yawn when stressed, just like we do. A stressful yawn is more prolonged and intense than a sleepy yawn. Dogs may also drool, lick, and scratch excessively when nervous. Again, rule out medical conditions and fleas when you see these, but also consider stress.

■ **Excessive shedding.** It’s normal for dogs to shed a lot in the spring and fall, getting rid of their old coats to prepare for the new season. Some dogs also normally shed year-round – Labrador Retrievers and Huskies (and several other breeds) are notorious for this. However, shedding can also increase when a dog is anxious, so watch for this type of shedding as a stress indicator.

■ **Panting.** Panting when hot, excited or having just exercised is, of course, normal. If, however, your dog is panting absent those conditions, it is quite likely due to stress.

## HELP YOUR DOG BECOME HAPPIER AND HEALTHIER

This is not a complete list of all the signs exhibited by dogs who are stressed. Your dog may display some of the stress signs listed above or others. Take time to observe her and identify her particular signs of stress so you can recognize them and help her when she is stressed.

Most importantly, remember that when your dog is behaving inappropriately it is most often because she is stressed and cannot help it, not because she wants to misbehave. One of my new favorite aphorisms is, “Your dog isn’t *giving* you a hard time, she’s *having* a hard time.” Remember this, and help her times get better. 🐾

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