



Resource sheet:

Learn how to respond when your dog is stressed

Dogs communicate mostly with their bodies. Learning to read and respond to your dog's subtle signs of stress can help prevent problem behaviors including anxiety and aggression.

Learn to read your dog's body language

For simplicity, we have divided dog body language into three categories: happy, angry and stressed. In our classes we make lists of behaviors that fall into each of these groups. Some common responses include:

Dog body language most commonly noted by students		
Happy (open, friendly)	Angry (closed, assertive)	Stressed (unsure, worried)
Wagging tail	Tail straight up or still	Tail down
Tongue out, mouth open	Mouth closed, growling	Panting, mouth wrinkled
Bouncy, playful	Still and silent	Shaking or still
Ears up	Ears forward	Ears back
Body curved	Body straight, tall	Body low

Some behaviors can fall into multiple categories (e.g. tail wagging). Most of us easily recognise happy and angry behavior, but stress behavior (unless strong/extreme) can be harder to notice.

Recognising stress behavior

Stress can be due to fear, excitement, indecisiveness or anxiety. Like stress in people, it is not always "bad" for a dog to have stress, but it is necessary to notice your dog is stressed and to figure out why.

Before dogs display strong stress signals (e.g. panting, shaking) they display some subtle signals, known by a variety of names including "stress signals", "displacement signals", "calming signals", "appeasement behavior" and "cutoff signals". (Ryan, 2005)

Subtle stress signals include:

- **Yawning.** Yawning, suprisingly enough, is one of the more common stress signals. Consider the context — did the dog just wake up from a nap?
- **Shaking off.** Shaking like he's just had a bath. Often displayed in new situations or when excited.
- **Lip and nose licking.** A quick little flick of the tongue. Frequent lip licking can be seen in photographs because some dogs are worried about the camera. (If the dog has just eaten, of course, she may just be licking her lips, so look also at the context.)
- **Walking slowly using slow movements.** Very slow movements. Moving quickly around this dog can be perceived as a threat.
- **Blinking, averting eyes, turning away.** A swift movement turning the head to the side and back, to being held at the side for some time. People can use it too – if a scared dog barks or growls at you, turn your head.
- **Moving the eyes from side to side.** Similar to the head turn, used to avert a direct stare.
- **Turning completely away or standing sideways.**
- **Freezing.** A barely noticeable sudden stop, or suddenly sitting, standing or lying still, frozen to the ground.
- **Moving in an arc.** Curving and walking in an arc. We don't normally see dogs walking head on — they approach from the side in curving lines, walking beyond each other's nose to sniff rear ends, standing side to side. Only dogs who are sure of the outcome of a situation will attempt to meet head on.

The easiest stress signals to notice seem to be the *yawn*, *lip lick* and *shake off*. Train yourself to see stress signals automatically in dogs by isolating one signal at a time (e.g. stress yawning) and spend a week watching every dog you meet to see if you can notice the signal. The next week, when you feel confident noticing stress yawns, watch for another (e.g. lip licking). With practice, you'll start seeing stress signals automatically.

Respond to stress signals

Consider the context when you see stress signals. Is there a reason? Is your dog shaking off because she has dust on her coat from lying on the ground? Is he yawning because he's tired?

Look for signals that seem out of place, and watch especially closely for a series of signals. A single stress yawn might warrant you simply paying more attention to the situation, whereas a chain of signals means you need to act. If your dog licks his lips, shakes off, yawns, then freezes in place, he's telling you that he's quite stressed. That's your cue to help him out of the situation.

Getting your dog "out of the situation" might mean taking him to a quieter place to calm down, or simply calling a quick time-out to a play session.

Are you stressing your dog out?

We live in a busy world, with less and less time for our dogs. Some of us accidentally create adrenaline junkies (tennis ball junkies) and endurance dogs by giving them sustained running and increased physical activity whenever we have a little time. These dogs can begin to remain in an excited state, which is unhealthy in the same way that sustained high stress is unhealthy for people.

Over-excitement or exhaustion caused by sustained, high-energy exercise can also cause dogs to go into defense action more quickly — he snaps and bites because he overreacts. Dogs need 48 hours to come down from events we know are stressful (vet visits, an aggressive interaction, a dog show, etc.) and also need settling time between vigorous exercise events.

Be aware of dogs who seem unable to settle. We naturally think "she needs more exercise" when

the dog probably needs longer periods of lower-energy activities with her family. Some breeds do need a lot more exercise than others, but sometimes the dog simply needs help in settling.

So, what should you do? First, spend enough time with your dog every day. Companionship makes your dog feel secure and settled. Play games but also take him for walks, off-leash when possible, so he can sniff and spend time calmly exploring. Called a "sniffing walk", this is one of the most relaxing things for a dog to do, "doggie therapy".

How much is enough? If a dog comes back calm from a walk, then it is the right distance at the right pace. If a dog is restless and looks as if she is craving more, then consider reducing the pace and increasing the distance. Take care not to tug your dog along, pulling her nose off the ground, just to "keep moving". If she stops to sniff at something, wait until she finishes before continuing.

Speak your dog's language

Now that you've learned how to read your dog's body language, use it with your dog.

Encouraging: Use open body language (squatting down, leaning back) to invite a dog to come over to you. Don't alarm a fearful dog by walking boldly, directly toward her.

Inhibiting: Use closed body language (standing tall, looking away) to discourage dogs from coming over to you, or jumping up on you.