

# Stress Signals

*Learn to recognize signs of (and then reduce) your dog's stress.*

BY PAT MILLER

Recently, there was a video clip of a two-legged dog making the e-mail rounds. Faith, a gold-colored Lab mix, is missing her front legs due to a congenital deformity. Several people sent me the clip with their comments about how wonderful it was that the dog could walk and hop around on her two hind legs and lead a relatively normal life.

I watched the clip a number of times, and found the footage more disturbing than uplifting. I was concerned that *every person* who sent me the clip thought Faith looked “happy.” I wondered if we were watching entirely different videos! What I saw was a dog who was noticeably stressed in almost every bit of the footage, with the exception of a few seconds showing Faith lying under the covers in bed with her owner.

I suspect that the people who sent me the video saw the heartwarming miracle of a dog who survived against all odds. I saw a



**It's difficult to see in black and white, but what looks a bit like an icicle drooping out of this little dog's mouth is, in fact, a long rope of drool. He had planted himself by the gate of a dog park and was clearly ready to leave, although his owner hadn't noticed.**

The Whole  Dog Journal™

## WHAT YOU CAN DO . . .

- **Observe your dog closely and make a list of the behaviors he manifests when stressed. Watch for those subtle ones!**
- **Study the list to determine which stressors you can remove from your dog's environment. Create a plan to change his association from negative to positive with as many of the stressors as possible.**
- **Watch other dogs you come across and make note of their signs of stress to improve your stress observation skills.**

dog who was stress-panting, ears pinned against her head, eyes large, anxious whenever her owner walked away from her, and avoiding contact when admiring members of the public reached out to touch her. Why was there such a huge difference between our interpretations of the dog's behavior?

Please note: I'm not saying Faith appears to be on the verge of biting someone, or has any tendency at all toward aggression. But she certainly does appear stressed – at least when she's been filmed.

Many of the folks who sent Faith's clip to me are above-average dog people. They read WDJ, frequent good training e-mail lists, and read the right books. If *they* missed a package of behaviors that signaled to me that Faith was not calm and relaxed, it's not surprising that so many *average* (and worse) dog owners are fairly poor at recognizing signs of stress.

The smart, aware owner is always on the alert for signs that her dog is stressed, so she can alleviate tension when it occurs. Those whose dogs are easily stressed often

become hypervigilant, watching closely for tiny signs that presage more obvious stress-related behaviors, in order to forestall those unpleasant reactions.

If more owners were aware of the subtle signs of stress, fewer dogs would bite. That would be a very good thing.

## Why de-stressing helps

There are many reasons why it's important to pay attention to stress indicators, including the following:

- Stress is a universal underlying cause of aggression.
- Stress can have a negative impact on the dog's health.
- The dog's ability to learn is impaired when she is stressed.
- Dogs respond poorly to cues when stressed.
- Negative classical conditioning can occur as a result of stress.



**Cody: Trembling, vomiting.**

For all of these reasons, and more, it's worthwhile to monitor your dog for signs of stress, and take appropriate steps to make his life a little easier.

### Signs of stress

Listed below are some stress behaviors that are often overlooked. With each behavior, the appropriate immediate course of action for you is to identify the stressor(s) and figure out how to decrease the intensity of that stressful stimulus. In many cases this can be accomplished by increasing the distance between your dog and the stressor, be it a child, another dog, a noisy street sweeper, a person in uniform, men with beards . . .

If possible, remove the stressor from your dog's environment entirely. For example, if he's stressed by harsh verbal corrections, shock collars, and NASCAR races on TV, you can probably simply stop exposing him to them. For stressors that can't be eliminated, a long-term program of counter-conditioning and desensitization can change the dog's association with a stressor from negative to positive, removing one more trigger for stress signals and possible aggression. (See "Touch Me, Touch Me Not," August 2004, to learn how to carry out a counter-conditioning and desensitization program.)

■ **Anorexia:** Stress causes the appetite to shut down. A dog who won't eat moderate to high-value treats may just be distracted or simply not hungry, but this is more often an indicator of stress.

■ **Appeasement/deference signals:** These don't always indicate stress. Appeasement and deference are important everyday communication tools for keeping peace in social hierarchies, and are often presented in calm, stress-free interactions.

Appeasement and/or deference signals are generally offered by a lower-ranking dog



**Carly: Yawning at photo shoots.**

to a higher-ranking member in a social group to promote the tranquility of the group and the safety of the lower-ranking member. When offered in conjunction with other behaviors, they can be an indicator of stress as well. Appeasement and deference signals include:

- **Slow movement:** Lower-ranking dog appears to be moving in slow motion.
- **Lip licking:** Lower-ranking dog licks at the mouth of the higher-ranking member of the social group.
- **Sitting/lying down/exposing underside:** Lower-ranking dog offers submission by lowering body posture, exposing vulnerable parts.
- **Turning head away, averting eyes:** Lower-ranking dog avoids eye contact, exposes neck.

■ **Avoidance:** Dog turns away, shuts down, evades handler's touch and treats.

■ **Brow ridges:** Furrows or muscle ridges appear in dog's forehead and around eyes.

■ **Digestive disturbances:** Vomiting and diarrhea can be a sign of illness, *or* of stress; the digestive system reacts strongly to stress. Carsickness is often a stress reaction.

■ **Displacement behaviors:** These are behaviors performed in an effort to resolve an internal stress conflict for the dog, and are not related to hierarchy. They may be observed in a dog who is stressed and in isolation (for example, a dog left alone in an exam room in a veterinary hospital), differentiating them from behaviors related to relationship or hierarchy.

Displacement behaviors include:

- **Blinking** (eyes blink at a rate that is faster than normal).



**Dog at park: Foaming at the mouth.**

- **Chattering teeth.**
- **Nose licking** (dog's tongue flicks out once or multiple times).
- **Scratching.**
- **Shaking off** (as if wet, but dog is dry).
- **Yawning.**

■ **Drizzling or foaming:** This may be an indication of stress – or a response to the presence of food, or an indication of a mouth injury.

■ **Excessive grooming:** Dog may lick or chew paws, legs, flank, tail, and genital areas, even to the point of self-mutilation.

■ **Hyperactivity:** Frantic behavior or just restless pacing, sometimes misinterpreted as ignoring or "blowing off" owner.

■ **Immune system disorders:** Long-term stress weakens the immune system. Immune related problems can improve if dog's overall levels of stress are reduced.

■ **Lack of attention/focus:** The brain has difficulty processing information when stressed.

■ **Leaning/clinging:** The stressed dog seeks contact with human as reassurance.

■ **Lowered body posture:** "Slinking" or acting "guilty" or "sneaky" (all misinterpretations of dog body language) can be indicators of stress.

■ **Mouthing:** Willingness to use mouth on human skin – can be puppy exploration or adult poor manners, but can also be an expression of stress, ranging from gentle nibbling (flea biting), to hard taking of treats, to painfully hard mouthing, snapping, or biting.

■ **Obsessive-compulsive disorders:**

These include imaginary fly-snapping, light- and shadow-chasing, tail-chasing, pica (eating nonfood objects), flank-sucking, self-mutilation, and more. While OCDs probably have a genetic component, the behavior itself is usually triggered by stress.

■ **Panting:** Rapid shallow or heavy breathing – normal if the dog is warm or has just been exercising but can be a sign of stress in the dog who is not physically exerting himself or is over-warm.

■ **Stiff movement:** Tension can cause a noticeable stiffness in leg, body, and tail movements.

■ **Stretching:** To release stress-related tension in muscles, many dogs perform elaborate, deep stretches (may also occur after sleeping).

■ **Sweaty paws:** Damp footprints can be seen on floors, exam tables, or rubber mats.

■ **Trembling:** May be due to stress (or cold!).



**A portrait of three stress cases, from left to right. Paws is whining. Cooper is stress-panting, even though it's not hot. Rupert keeps licking his nose.**

■ **Whining:** This high-pitched vocalization, irritating to most humans, is an indication of stress. While some may interpret it as excitement, a dog who is excited to the point of whining is also stressed.

■ **Yawning.**

As I reread this list, I find myself making note of my own dogs' signs of stress, past and present. I recall the time my dearly missed Pomeranian, Dusty, was earning the third leg of his Companion Dog degree. As I released him from the three-minute Long Down, I noticed tiny, sweaty pawprints on the rubber show-ring mats where his little paws had rested. Only in that moment did I realize how stressful that exercise must have been for him.

Our sound-sensitive Corgi, Lucy, trembles violently with the approach of a thunderstorm, long before I can hear the distant booming, while Tucker, our Cattle Dog-mix, just comes and leans against me – also well before I can hear the storm. With dogs like those two, who needs weather forecasters? Dubhy, our dog-reactive Scotty, normally takes treats with exceptional gentleness – except when he's stressed in the presence of another dog. Then it's fingers beware!

Even we humans succumb to the natural biological need to use body language to express and relieve stress. I used to show hunters and jumpers (horses). Every time I sat on my horse outside the over-fences classes waiting for my turn to compete, I would be afflicted with the uncontrollable need to yawn – and yawn – and yawn. Only recently did I realize why. Stress! It affects us all. 🐾

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## “Without Provocation”

Almost every “Dog Mauls Toddler” headline is followed by an article that includes, among other things, these two phrases:

1. “The dog was always good with children,” and,
2. “The bite was unprovoked.”



Both statements make me cringe. Most people who think their dogs are “good with children” don't realize that their dogs only *tolerate* children – the dogs are actually stressed in the presence of children, at least to some degree. These dogs usually show low level signs of stress that would warn an observant owner that they really don't think little humans are all that great after all. Dogs who are truly “good with children” *adore* them; they don't just tolerate them. They are delighted to see children, and, with wriggling body, wagging tail, and squinty eyes, can't wait to go see them. Anything less than this joyful response is mere tolerance.

With the very rare exception of idiopathic aggression – aggression for which there is no discernible cause – every bite is provoked *from the dog's perspective*. We, as humans, may feel the bite wasn't justified or appropriate, but rest assured the dog felt justified in biting. In many case, the provocation is pretty apparent from the article: the dog was kept on a chain; the dog had a litter of puppies; the toddler was left outside in the backyard with a dog who had just been fed. In each case, the dog was stressed beyond his or her ability to control his bite.

Raise your stress awareness. Examine news reports about dog attacks to see if you can identify the possible stressors and provocation in each incident. Then be sure to protect your own dog from those potential bite-causing circumstances.