



CDTS
Cranbourne Dog
Training School

"Positively the best- for you and your dog"

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STRESS IN YOUR DOG

How to recognise it and how to deal with it

We all have the ability to get stressed - our dogs included. So what is stress? Stress is defined as the body's response to any physical or mental demand. It is a genetically predetermined reaction over which the individual, whether it is a dog or a person, has no control.

When stressed, the body becomes chemically unbalanced. To deal with this imbalance the body releases chemicals into the bloodstream in an attempt to rebalance itself. The reserve of these chemicals is limited. You can dip into it only so many times before it runs dry and the body loses its ability to rebalance. Prolonged periods of imbalance result in neurotic behaviour and the inability to function. Both dogs and people can succumb to phobias, followed by situation anxiety, which can lead to obsessive compulsive disorders.

Stress lowers the body's immune response so, any ongoing stressful situation or environment will result in making the dog ill in some way, plus more susceptible to virus etc.

So, how do you recognise stress?

Stress is characterised as 'positive' – manifesting itself in increased activity, and 'negative' – manifesting itself in decreased activity. Stress in our dogs triggers the fight or flight response. Positively stressing dogs will be seen to be running around, bouncing up and down or jumping on you, whining, barking, mouthing – in fact any time you think your dog is just being silly or tiresome.

Negatively stressing dogs will be seen to be slinking behind you, freezing, running away or responding slowly to a command. You may think your dog seems tired, sluggish or disinterested. These are not signs of relaxation, but are coping behaviours for negative stress.

What you may see

a) in positive stressing dogs

Wrinkling of upper corners of mouth (seen in Retrievers and Rottweilers)

Red eyes - in the eye itself and in the whites of the eyes

Very pink gums - seen in springers, boxers and white dogs, also chocolate labradors

Aggression

Barking

b) in negatively stressing dogs

A dog that lies quietly on the floor at your feet – even if there is a lot going on around him.

Averting his gaze/turning his from whatever is in front of him.

Whining or shivering

c) With both kinds of stress

Excessive panting or drooling

Muscle tremors

Sweating pads

Dilated pupils

What causes stress in our dogs?

Stress may be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic sources are all the things that come with the dog, including conformation and health. They are inherited and come within the dog. Dogs vary in coping abilities and stress thresholds, and what you see is what you get. Realistically there is not much you can do to change your dog, such as training a dog to deal better with stress. You can use stress management techniques to mitigate the impact of the stress.

Extrinsic sources range from the diet you feed to even the relationship you have with your dog. They come from outside the dog and are introduced externally. These can include:

A lack of adequate socialisation

Training or even the appropriateness of the training method being used

Diet - incorrect or change of

Inconsistency - in routine or in dealing with the dog on a daily basis

Travelling

Change of environment

Family problems

Position of rank within a multi-dog household (lower ranking individuals can get stressed)

Boredom

Smothering - giving too much love or attention

Exercise - lack of or too much

These are just a few examples. Coming to classes, meeting new dogs, the environment plus having to learn new exercises will cause stress to a lesser or greater degree in all your dogs.

Fortunately, all the above are under your control!

Dealing with stress in our dogs when training

Become aware of how your dog reacts to stress i.e. positively or negatively, plus the circumstances under which the dog stresses. It could be location or something you are doing. Let's say your dog stresses in a positive way, by getting bouncy or overexcited. It is important to keep your hands still and off your dog, and keep your voice quiet, or you will excite him even more. Every behaviour has a time frame and experience will tell you how long it takes for your dog to calm down under different circumstances. During times of severe stress, your dog is unable to learn or respond to commands, even those he knows well, until his body rebalances itself. Your goal is to restore your dog's breathing pattern and body posture to normal. If the stress is linked to your location, it may be prudent to remove your dog from the situation and give him somewhere quiet to calm down.

If your dog stresses in a negative way, take him for a walk to get the circulation going and redistribute the chemicals that have been released, so his breathing can return to normal. If in a class situation, massaging the top of his shoulders may help, just because he is quiet does not mean he is calm. Try to turn him on with food or a toy. Under no circumstances should you try to pull or drag him to get him up – use encouragement and a food lure if necessary. Please understand that your dog has no control over his response to stress – he inherited this behaviour- and it is your job to manage it as best you can. Through proper management, your dog will become accustomed, with every successful repetition, to coping with new situations and handle them like an old trooper.

Other ways to help control stress generally

1. Use medication – either or both conventional medicines or homeopathic – seek professional advice
2. A proper balanced diet is very important
3. An increase in exercise has been proved to help lower stress levels
4. Mental stimulation is very important
5. Increase feelings of security and safety (i.e. routine)
6. Do not over indulge
7. Use a behaviour modification programme