



Stress and your Dog

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Just as people experience stress from having to cope with all sorts of situations and pressures in their daily lives, so do dogs. Stress in itself is not a bad thing. A mild amount of stress motivates us to get things accomplished i.e. seeing your house unpleasantly untidy or dirty should motivate you to clean it! However, when too much pressure is placed on us (e.g. the house is falling apart and we never have enough time or money to fix it) we start to suffer emotionally and physically. The

same is true for dogs: socialising, training and daily activities may require dogs to cope with mild amounts of stress, but inappropriate training methods, unhealthy social experiences and hectic daily activities will place excessive pressure on dogs and may cause them to go into a state of **distress** (when the body's resources are diverted away from normal biological functions) or can cause **chronic stress** (when the body remains in an emergency state for a long period of time).



Both humans' and animals' bodies respond to danger by getting into an optimum state to deal with a threat. For example, if you awoke to a blood-curdling howl in the middle of the night, you would suddenly be wide awake, blood would rush to your muscles and all your senses would be heightened so that you would be ready to fight or to flee at the first opportunity. However, once you realized that it was just your dog having an interesting dream, your body would quickly return to a normal state i.e. your blood pressure would go back to normal and your senses dull again so that you could continue to function in a normal "resting" state.



Problems occur when animals are frequently placed in situations where the body goes into "survival mode". It takes a while for the stress hormones involved in preparing the body for flight or fight to dissipate and so repeated exposures to frightening or highly stressful situations mean that the body never gets a chance to return to normal. Resources that would be used to keep the digestive system functioning properly and which would keep the immune system healthy are used instead to keep the body ready for fight or flight, so health begins to deteriorate. While there may be other causes for the phenomenon listed below, the following may all be symptoms of ongoing stress in your dog:

1. **General nervousness/jumpiness**
2. **Restlessness**
3. **Excessive inactivity or sleeping**
4. **Inappropriately aggressive behaviour**
5. **Frequent displays of calming signals**

6. **Altered sexual behaviour**
7. **Destructiveness**
8. **Excessive barking**
9. **Self-mutilation**
10. **Loss of appetite**
11. **Diarrhoea**
12. **Bad breath**
13. **Dandruff or sudden moulting**

14. **Panting**
15. **Shaking/trembling**
16. **Compulsive behaviour**
17. **Lack of concentration**
18. **Withdrawn behaviour**
19. **Inappropriate urination**

It is not only the fear of imminent danger that can cause a dog to experience stress. Failing to obtain expected rewards or daily needs (e.g. being denied social interaction, exercise, mental stimulation, play, shelter, rest and sufficient food and water) can lead to frustration, stress and even depression.

Here are some of the things that can cause stress:

1. **Not enough rest or “down-time”:** While it may seem like a lot of time to us, dogs need at least 17 hours a day in which to rest and sleep.
2. **Overcrowding (too many dogs) in the home**
3. **Too many activities:** Expecting a dog to exercise excessively or compete constantly in dog sports can place undue stress upon him.
4. **Repeated frightening experiences** e.g. bullying by other dogs
5. **Too much attention/emotional dependence from the owner**
6. **An emotional, overly-loud, hyperactive or anxious owner**
7. **A chaotic household with lots of visitors coming and going constantly** (Worse for territorial types)
8. **Lack of routine**
9. **Lack of training or harsh training methods**
10. **Lack of social contact (human and canine).**
11. **Lack of exercise and enrichment activities.**
12. **Lack of freedom.**



Drawing up a plan to minimise stress:

Once you have identified which situations and events may be causing your dog stress it is important to come up with concrete ways in which you can eliminate them or at least minimise the impact they are having on your dog. The following guidelines may be useful:

1. Ensure that your dog is getting sufficient rest by giving him a comfortable bed in a quiet corner which he can retreat to whenever he wants. Teach children to **“let sleeping dogs lie”**.
2. Decide at what times you intend to walk, feed, groom, train and play with your dog and try to **establish a regular routine** for all these activities.
3. **List those situations which are most stressful for your dog** (e.g. visiting the vet, going to the dog parlour, being examined by a breed judge, having to walk past a neighbourhood dog that is particularly aggressive behind the fence etc.) **and try not to have all these things happen in the same week!**
4. **Remove harmful influences from your dog’s life completely.** If your dog is being teased by another person or attacked or badly bullied by another dog, do not allow this to



continue. If a friend visits your home and teases your dog, ask them to stop and if they don't, ask them to leave!

5. **Moderate exciting activities with quieter ones.** Even really good things like running with other dogs and competing in dog sports can be over-stimulating if engaged in too often. If your dog has a really good outing and plays with 20 dogs one day, take him on a quieter walk just on his own the next day. Keep training sessions at home short and don't expect your dog to do agility classes on Mondays, tracking on Tuesdays, obedience on Wednesdays, protection training on Thursdays, Fly-ball on Fridays, carting on Saturdays and ring craft on Sundays!
6. **Take your dog for a moderate daily walk, preferably off-leash.** Exercise is a good outlet for stress and helps to keep both mind and body healthy.
7. **Do give your dog the opportunity to play with other dogs, IF he is sociable.** Play causes feel-good chemicals to be released in the brain and so heightens mood.
8. **Play with your dog yourself** – this is especially good for dogs that don't play with other dogs and it will be just as good for you as it is for your dog!
9. **Decide on the household rules and make sure that everyone in the family sticks to them** so that your dog finds life in your household predictable and consistent.
10. **Provide mentally stimulating games** (e.g. hide and seek)
11. **Avoid using punishment** (leash corrections, yelling, smacking, shake cans, squirt bottles etc.)
12. **Give your dog plenty of things to chew:** Chewing relieves stress.



As careful as we are with our dogs, things do sometimes happen that are out of our control. If your dog does have a bad experience and is very frightened or stressed as a result, give him plenty of time to recover e.g. if your dog has to undergo an unpleasant procedure at the vet one day, don't expect him to compete in an obedience show the next day!

Stress and PAT visiting dogs



In 2003 research into the physiological effects of "positive" human-dog interaction on *both* dogs and humans was conducted (J.S.J Odendaal 2003), where before only the effects on humans had been investigated. The findings showed that as with humans, dogs had increased levels of oxytocin (social bonding hormone), dopamine (reward chemical) and a type of endorphin associated with euphoric states after such interactions. However, although humans showed lower levels of cortisol (stress hormone) after positive interactions with dogs, the dogs did not show any decrease in stress hormones. This was attributed to the dogs finding the environment stressful.

So while the dogs enjoyed the interactions with people, there was clearly still some element of stress involved. With this in mind, how do we ensure that our PAT dogs are enjoying their "work" and are not finding it too stressful?

Look for immediate signs of stress during visits:

1. What is your dog's body language like? Is he displaying any calming signals or avoidance behaviours (licking lips, yawning a lot, avoiding eye-contact, lying down, tucking his tail etc.)?
2. Does your dog look autonomically aroused (Pupils dilated, hair raised, trembling, panting etc.)?
3. Does your dog appear over-excited and behave in a silly manner? (This is known as "stressing up")
4. Does your dog look quieter than usual and become fairly non-responsive? ("Stressing down")
5. Does your dog avoid any particular place, person or physical contact?
6. Does your dog refuse to take treats?
7. Does your dog want to urine mark in the facility you visit?



Look for signs of stress after a visit:

1. Is your dog more subdued than usual after a visit?
2. Is your dog grumpy or reactive after a visit?
3. Remember to look for all the general ongoing signs of stress mentioned previously

How to prevent stress in our PAT dogs:

1. Protect your dog from bad experiences
2. Keep visits fairly short (ideally a busy visit with lots of physical contact should not continue for more than an hour – lower-key visits could be stretched out a bit longer)
3. Make sure that your dog is rested, has been fed and had a chance to go to the loo before visits.
4. Don't visit if your dog is at all unwell or injured in any way.
5. Don't visit if your dog has just been through a very stressful experience in the previous 24 hours.
6. Look at the general daily factors that influence stress levels listed previously and ensure that your dog's lifestyle is healthy and balanced.
7. Give your dog something really good to chew at home after a visit.
8. Make sure that if you are visiting with other dogs all the dogs get on well together and there is no tension between them.
9. Practise fun training exercises you can do on visits to keep your dog's cognitive brain functioning and drive the reward system (trick training for treats).
10. ALWAYS take treats along and have people feed your dog or you feed your dog regularly throughout the visit.

While generally dogs that have qualified to do PAT work LOVE interactions with people, they cannot tell us when they have had enough or if they are having a bad day. While they may often appear to be angels, they are just dogs and it is our job to protect them and make their lives as happy and enjoyable as possible so that they can continue to enrich the lives of others.



Bibliography:

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3. *J.S.J. Odendaal and R.A. Meintjes: Neurophysiological correlates of affiliative behaviour between humans and dogs, The Veterinary Journal, 2003, Vol.165: 296-301*