

Stress

There are two types of stress, short term and long term. Short term stress is a normal, indeed crucial behaviour for survival. Long term stress is abnormal, whether through regular short term stress (i.e. regular vet visits) or living in a restrictive environment (i.e. being unable to fulfil its instinctual drives for days, weeks, years) or indeed living with fearful domestic objects in the home.

Long term stress affects the health and welfare of the dog. The immune system is less able to function, the dog's reactions may be more severe than usual (for example resort to 'fight' more quickly than usual) Also, the dog may give up normal behaviours such as eating properly or sleeping. He or she may also adopt abnormal behaviours when under such stress, for example pica (eating non-nutritious substances) or over grooming, being destructive or barking, and so on.

Signs of stress

| Body Language | Uncharacteristic behaviour | Health |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Yawning | Withdrawn and subdued | Weight loss |
| Lip licking | Avoidance and unable to walk ahead | Increase in thirst |
| Tense facial muscles | 'Fiddle' behaviour e.g. scratching, sniffing, licking etc. (see over page) | Loss of appetite |
| Tense body muscles | Increased vocalisation | Skin problems e.g. eczema |
| Panting | Over grooming or self mutilation | Increase in appetite without weight gain |
| Change in tail carriage | Changes in toileting habits e.g. routine, toileting indoors | Digestive problems e.g. diarrhoea |
| Change in head carriage | Over dependence on handler Excessive excitement / hyperactivity Destructive behaviour Aggression | |

Causes of stress

These will vary greatly, depending on the individual dog and the environments to which each dog is exposed. Hopefully, you will be able to identify what it is that is causing your dog stress, but below are some examples:

- Environmental
 - exposure to new environment
 - particular environment that is unpleasant for the dog e.g. too noisy, too busy
- Changes
 - handler e.g. new owner
 - environment and/or routine e.g. moving house
- Handler
 - asking for too much too soon, inhibiting natural behaviours
 - over physical or inconsistent handling
- Health and welfare
 - physical needs not being met e.g. inadequate exercise, unbalanced diet, poor sleep
 - psychological needs not being met e.g. companionship, canine interaction, play
 - pain and discomfort

Minimising stress

If you notice that your dog is showing signs of stress (i.e. displaying any of the 4 'F's') it is important to identify what it is that is causing this, and then take action to minimise it.

In order to work out what it is that is stressful for your dog, you may need to try to view the situation objectively and from your dog's perspective. Setting up appropriate environments and understanding normal behaviour is key here.

- Immediate actions:
 - Stop the activity that you are doing with the dog
 - Remove the dog from the stressful place or situation
 - Give the dog some space to take 'flight' or reassure the dog as appropriate (be aware that reassuring a dog too much can reinforce the idea that there is something to be worried about, much as it can with a child)
 - Have a confident, calm, positive approach
 - Review your handling style
- Long term strategies:
 - Seek veterinary advice, to check for physical causes or for a referral to a qualified behaviour specialist
 - Avoid particular environments or activities that cause your dog stress.
 - Reduce your dog's workload, setting up an area where he or she can be away from the rest of the household with food, water, chews, toys, and appropriate bedding.
 - Ensure you are providing your dog with all of the opportunities to meet and display their natural physical needs e.g. chewing, adequate exercise, balanced diet
 - Review your dog's temperament and needs
 - Familiarise your dog to new environments and activities gradually

The 4 'F's' - four fear responses

An animal has four responses to a threatening situation. Be aware that if you choose to ignore your dog's early reactions to the scary situation, you risk them moving on to other fear responses.

