

## What are the signs of Stress in dogs?

Our canine partners usually do their best to please us humans, their owners, but always remember that they are not machines or tools. Dogs are living breathing individuals and they, like us, feel differently day by day. They experience emotion and they can suffer from stress just like us. But how do you know when your dog is feeling stressed?

Stress is cumulative. It can be communicated from handler to dog, one dog to another, one human to another, dog to handler and so on, round and round. It can become an obstacle to optimum performance by either side of the partnership. If you have had a tough day, time spent with your dog may be the perfect release of tension. Sometimes though it can be easy – inadvertently - to take out your pent-up emotions and frustrations on the dog.

Our expectations when training for agility may increase stress. We expect our dogs to learn to jump over poles. Then we sometimes shout at them when they jump the 'wrong' one. We want them to stop on contacts except when we don't want them to stop on contacts. No wonder the poor dogs are confused! We take them to a venue where there may be thousands of dogs in a fever pitch of excitement and then we leave them in a confined space for periods of time but within sound, sight and smell of their fellows which can be a recipe for mass hysteria!

How do you know when your dog is feeling stressed?

Dogs communicate through body language and they give off a variety of signals to indicate their state of mind. Similarly, if they recognise that you are stressed then they are quite capable of trying to signal you to calm down. Try to observe your dog in daily life to learn the signals of stress that are specific to him and what has triggered the stress on any particular occasion. We cannot totally prevent stress. Neither is it necessarily a bad thing unless your dog's stress level exceeds the point at which it is no longer capable of paying you attention which then, in itself, can become a source of further stress to both handler and dog.

There are many stress indicators to watch out for in the dog's body language ranging from:

- Change of posture – hugging or dropping to the ground
- Stretching
- Change of pace
- Abnormal tail movement
- Shaking and trembling
- Ceaseless pacing or simply lack of movement
- Shutting down - becoming 'flat' in posture and mentality
- Vocalisation – squeaking, whining, barking
- Facial expression – squinty or shifty eyes, dilated pupils, glazed expression, showing the whites of the eye
- Avoidance of eye contact
- Excessive panting, licking, yawning or drooling
- Frowning, has ears held back, corners of mouth may be held rigidly

- Any attention-seeking or irrational behaviours – digging, self-mutilation, persistent scratching, sniffing, spinning, circling, hiding, destruction of environment, etc

Obviously many of these activities may be perfectly normal at the appropriate time. What we really need to identify is 'out of context' behaviours. Once you learn your dog's triggers and stress indicators, you may be able to address the problem before the behaviour becomes excessive. However, there will always be situations beyond our control such as the weather (change of atmospheric pressure), the season (associated with un-neutered animals), gunfire or fireworks, proximity of other animals etc. when we may need to look for alternative coping strategies.