

The Strain of Stress

by Carol Gannaway

Stress is described in my Webster's Dictionary as "Mental or emotional strain." Make no mistake about it our dog's lives are filled with stress. Going to work everyday and leaving our dogs alone is one example. How can that be stressful? Dogs are pack animals and do best in a "pack" environment; being home alone is stressful. Some dogs are able to deal with the stress by napping the day away while other dogs are unable to cope with the stress and suffer from what is called separation anxiety. A dog with separation anxiety might find relief from the stress of being alone by excessive barking, inappropriate elimination habits, endless pacing, or destructive chewing. You get the idea. Most dogs however fall somewhere in between. Once you recognize the signs of stress in your canine companion you can help him to relax and relieve some of the strain.

It is not up to us to decide what is stressful for our dog; our dog's behavior will reveal that information to us. Here is a list of behaviors that are indicators that your dog is experiencing stress.

- Panting
- Excessive barking, whining
- Aggression
- Pacing
- Excessive licking
- Digging
- Chewing
- Biting the leash
- Shedding
- Dandruff
- Sweaty paws
- Foam drool
- Tense muscles
- Dilated pupils
- Excessive tail wagging
- Shivering (when it is not cold)

The more obvious experiences that may cause stress for some dogs are, adding a new pet to the family, moving to a new home, rehoming for the dog, divorce, marriage.sound familiar? But some of the not so obvious reasons for stress could be you have company, taking a training class, harsh training methods, too many trips to the off leash park, not enough trips to the off leash park, too many hours alone, not enough exercise, too much ball throwing, riding in the car, pain from an injury or arthritis. Whereas one dog may love riding in the car, it may cause trembling or excessive barking in another dog. An observant canine caretaker will notice the signs of stress and try to help the dog deal effectively with stress.

One of the keys to a happy healthy dog is balance. Balance between rest and exercise and time alone and time spent with other people and dogs. Inconsistency is another one of the causes of stress. Maintain a routine feeding schedule and the guidelines set through training such as, sitting politely to have the leash put on, sitting to greet people, and walking on the leash in partnership with you.

Here are a couple of things for you to try if the stress is getting to you:

1. Try rhythmic deep breathing, it is easy to forget to breathe when stressed.
2. Find out more about TellingtonTouch, a style of massage, by checking out a book on the subject from the library, (author, Linda Tellington) or of course there is the World Wide Web. The TTouch style of massage is relaxing for both your dog and for you. Gentle stroking and circular TTouces on your dog's ear during times of stress may help your dog relax.

When your dog notices you getting stressed out he may send some calming signals your way. Yawning is a calming signal from dogs, they use it with each other and they try it on us, next time your dog is yawning think "breathe deep and calm down." Another calming signal dogs use among themselves is nose licking, where as you could yawn at your dog and send a clear calming signal back to him, nose licking is better left for the dogs. Pay attention next time you are with a group of dogs, another calming signal that dogs use with each other is head turning. Head turning relates the message 'let's be friends.' Try it with the next dog you meet. To find out more about calming signals in dogs read Turid Rugaas's book "On Talking Terms with Dogs." Be aware of when your dog may need a break from all of the fun and activities and find a quiet place for an ear rub.