



## NEWSLETTER #8

### HOW TO RECOGNIZE STRESS SIGNALS WITH YOUR DOG'S BODY LANGUAGE

Dogs communicate stress through their body language, using subtle signals many handlers don't notice. Body language associated with stress can be related to arousal (i.e., physiological stress) or to self-soothing after a stressor. Remember to look at the whole dog, rather than focusing on just one part.

- **Tight Lip:** A dog's lips are held tightly to his teeth rather than relaxed or floppy.
- **Forehead Crinkle:** When dogs are alert to a stressor, they raise the base of their ears. Regardless of ear shape, you can watch for their forehead to crinkle or furrow, which is caused by raising the base of the ears.
- **Ears Folded Back:** Dogs might fold their ears back and hold them out when they dislike a stimulus or situation. In some dogs, it's an obvious signal, sometimes called "dumbo ears."
- **Look Away:** One of the most common and frequently missed signs of stress is a dog looking away from a stimulus.
- **Turn Away:** When a dog looks at the stimulus while turning her head away, we see "whale eye." Some dogs turn their whole body away, or even turn their back to the stimulus.
- **Stiffness:** A stressed dog holds his body stiffly. You can notice this easily in the neck area. Remember, a relaxed and confident dog's body is "squishy."

- **Reduced Activity:** Dogs communicate through actions as noted above. They also communicate passively by lack of actions. A stressed dog will slow her movement. This is common when a dog is first introduced to training in public access environments. It is often mistaken for “calm” or “good” behavior! Some handlers unfortunately describe this reduced activity as being “thoughtful,” which is an unfortunate euphemism for distress. Many handlers do not notice reduced activity until it escalates into total shutdown.

Practice identifying subtle indicators of aversive stress so you can adapt training sessions to a dog’s current tolerance. When you see subtle signs of stress, support a dog with reinforcement, redirection or removal from the situation.

Now, let me suggest some activities that you can do to try and help you recognize possible signs you may have not noticed before.

Take your dog to a pet store. Have a friend or family member follow behind you to video record the dog while you walk her through the store.

- Did you sense that the dog was stressed?
- How many stress signs did you notice?
- Now watch the video and tally each stress sign you observe.
- Watch the video again, looking for only one stress sign, such as look away, and tally each occurrence you observe. Repeat for each stress sign.
- Was your initial impression of the dog’s stress accurate? How many stress signs did you miss before you watched the video?

It’s difficult for handlers to sometimes observe subtle behaviors while maintaining awareness of environmental stimuli and navigating through a store. Limitations of humans’ attention span, such as when switching focus between the environment and the dog, causes us to be less aware and also impairs our ability to remember the experience. This is another reason I like body cameras.

## **Now, let's talk about health stressors.**

Dogs can experience physical and health-related stressors that cause discomfort or physiological stress. These might not be obvious to handlers and may contribute to a dog's reduced tolerance for unrelated stressors.

There is temperature stress such as hot or cold weather or hot or cold paw pads. Skin irritation maybe from gear chafing or an unnoticed injury. An Ear infection or other unnoticed tooth problem. Inconsistent schedule of offering food, water or opportunity to eliminate can cause a lot of issues including unexpected accidents in public. Some people think they should withhold food during longer training days to lessen the need for a bathroom, but this can create more issues. Even Interrupted sleep or inadequate sleep duration and Inadequate rest or off-duty time.

## **Now, what about environmental stressors?**

Dogs experience environmental stressors frequently. Some dogs are reactive to environmental stimuli, while others cope more easily. There are many environmental stressors, including Irritations from insects, Loud or sudden noises, Weather, especially wind and rain. Unfamiliar dogs, Interactions with strangers or any Novel stimuli. Sounds like this dog probably isn't suited for service work, right?

Not necessarily. Moving at the appropriate pace recognizing the appropriate signs can work on a lot of these, especially if there is a fear stage. I personally recommend during fear stages to remove them from the novel situations and work on the basic foundations they are comfortable with. When the stage is over, work on it much slower this time.

**Now, let me again challenge you to see what you think should happen or what could have been done.**

A handler has systematically desensitized their 2-year-old Labrador Retriever service dog, Manny, to stimuli commonly found in zoos. In fact, the handler desensitized Manny to exotic animal odors by gradually exposing him to exotic animal odors by walking past a small zoo. The handler has had several successful outings to the zoo, which has about two dozen animal exhibits facing a public sidewalk. It is a popular location for the general public to walk pet dogs so the animals, including a docile monkey, are even desensitized to seeing dogs.

The handler felt prepared to visit a larger zoo while on vacation with their family. The zoo experience began successfully and Manny was able to work effectively in the distracting environment. In the middle of the zoo, the handler approached a monkey exhibit. A male monkey noticed Manny and began vocalizing loudly while displaying aggressive alarm behavior. The handler left the area immediately, which was appropriate for both the monkey's welfare and for Manny's experience. However, Manny was startled by the monkey's behavior and became fearful of monkeys—especially their vocalizations. He soon became reactive to similar animal sounds, such as peacocks and donkeys. So let's think on this one, as this could happen to anyone.

Training can be a stressful experience that requires a dog's action and attention. You can prevent aversive stress by recognizing subtle stress signs and changing the training environment or method immediately when you see them. Train in controlled environments when possible and arrange gradual exposures to novel stimuli. Now even though the handler in my example did their best, we can't always prepare them for everything. But, Training choices, such as your method or pace of training, can cause stress in some dogs as well. You must identify quickly when a training choice causes stress and change to a different strategy. Remember, the dog decides what is aversive—not the handler or trainer.

## **What can a handler do that can create issues?**

Using unclear, inconsistent or similar cues Progressing to the next training step when the prerequisite skills are not adequately trained. Training at too fast a pace, or without sufficient repetition. Forcing a new behavior or molding. Confining a dog such as asking for Down-Stay near or during a novel stimulus, like when people bring their service dogs in training to the Spirit Halloween store and have them sit or down, right next to an animatronic. Presenting an Intimidating posture such as leaning over a dog during spatial pressure, body handling or during retrieval and tug training. Use of conditioned punishers. Preventing a dog from making choices during training. This is why we love using free shaping! Even Omitting rewards intermittently when using a Terminal Marker such as "Yes!" or using a Clicker.

## **If you're struggling, please reach out to a professional trainer.**

It is understandable that disabled individuals have little to no income and can struggle to take care of the dog's needs, hiring a trainer may seem out of the question. But, also consider before getting a prospect that you may need to hire a trainer, and try to save up as much as possible as this could help you and your team become more successful. It's always so horrible to put so much time and money into a prospect that ends up failing when a trainer quite possibly could have helped redirect and guide you on your path to success. We want the prospects we bring on to be able to work for us as long as possible.

## **Wishing you a wonderful reading experience!**

Warm regards,

The Pup-Cessories Crafts Team