

7 Tell-Tale Emotional Signs That Dog Owners Often Miss

These signs can be subtle, so you have to take the time to learn and recognize them in your pet. But it's well worth the effort as you'll likely feel a stronger connection and bond with your pet when you do. How many of these soul-baring signs can you observe in your pet?

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs display submissive behaviors when they're stressed, fearful or anxious, as well as to let you know they're not a threat
- Many submissive behaviors are subtle, such as flattening ears against the head or wagging the tail low to the ground
- Other signs of submissive behavior include rolling onto the back, submissive urination, tucking the tail between the legs and avoiding direct eye contact

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As a pet owner, it's important to take the time to get to know your pooch — not only, for instance, that her favorite toy is the squeaky pig or that she often forgets to bring said pig in from outside, but also how to read her sometimes-subtle body language.

The fact is that while you and your dog may communicate very well overall, there's always room for improvement. And it's surprisingly easy to miss certain nuances of your dog's posture, eye contact or vocalizations and in so doing miss out on an opportunity to connect and strengthen your bond.

Submissive behavior is especially important to be aware of, as it's your dog's way of letting you know that she's not a threat and may, in some cases, be looking for some extra reassurances from you.

7 Signs of Submissive Behavior

Not all submissive behaviors are obvious, so if you notice any of the following, now you'll know why. Each is an example of your dog showing signs of submission:¹

1. **Rolling over or lying belly up** — When your dog takes on this vulnerable position, it's often a sign of submission, fear or an attempt to diffuse a stressful situation. Some dogs may enjoy having their belly rubbed during this time, but others may feel threatened if you try to do so.

Rolling over as a sign of submission was first described by Nobel prize-winning ethologist Konrad Lorenz in the 1950s. He noted that when two dogs or wolves fight, the defeated animal rolls over in order to offer his neck to the other animal.

When this occurs, the dominant animal will not bite the other, as he is considered to be no longer a threat. There are some caveats, however, according to canine researcher Stanley Coren, Ph.D., professor emeritus at The University of British Columbia.

"... [F]or this rollover to signal submission, the dog that goes down must stay down until the other dog stops all signs of aggression," he explained.

In other words, if a dog rolls over and displays his belly, then quickly jumps up and engages in more aggressive behaviors, like chasing or snapping the air, it was probably not a submissive behavior at all. In many cases, a dog that rolls over may actually be engaging in play behaviors.

Coren cited a study published in the journal *Behavioural Processes*, which found in dog play, rolling over is a combat tactic — not an act of submission.²

Rolling over, the researchers noted, allows a dog to deliver or avoid bites to the neck. In their observations of dog play behaviors, they found, "Most rollovers were either defensive (evading a nape bite) or offensive (launching an attack). None could be categorized as submissive."

2. **Submissive Urination** — Does your dog piddle at your feet when you arrive home, perhaps with her tail also tucked under and while avoiding eye contact? This is known as submissive urination, and it may be your dog's way of letting you know that she views you as the authority in the house.

While submissive urination occurs most often in puppies, it can occur in any age, typically after your dog has been scolded or put in an uncomfortable or scary situation.

Puppies often outgrow submissive urination on their own, but be sure to avoid punishing your dog (no matter what age) for this behavior. Doing so may increase the frequency of the urination as well as the likelihood of it continuing into adulthood.

Submissive urination in older dogs is a behavioral issue best dealt with using a trainer familiar with confidence-building protocols and positive training methods to build communication between you and your dog.

You can also cut down on this behavior initially by completely ignoring your dog when you arrive home, then turning your body sideways during greetings, avoiding direct eye contact and waiting to touch her until she's settled down.

When you do kneel down to touch your dog, scratching her under the chin (not on top of the head or back of the neck) may help.³ Alternatively, try to greet your dog outdoors so that if your dog urinates you won't have a mess on your hands.

3. **Pulling ears backward or flattening them against the head** — Your dog's ears give many clues about his emotional state. A relaxed, confident dog will typically hold her ears upright, which may also be a sign that your dog is alert.

When a dog is feeling stressed, fearful or submissive, however, she may move her ears back so they lie flat against her head. If your dog has long floppy ears, this movement may be subtle and revealed only by looking closely at the base of your dog's ears (not the ears themselves).

4. **Submissive grin** — Not to be confused with a snarl, a submissive grin is a toothy smile of sorts that your dog may flash you to show she's friendly and not a threat. This may be combined with other submissive signs like a lowered tail, licking her lips or avoiding eye contact.

Noticing your dog's full body language is important in this case to distinguish a submissive grin from a snarl. The latter is a sign of potential aggression and involves a dog wrinkling her nose and showing her canine teeth, often with a stiff posture and facial expression.

5. **Tucked-in tail or low, fast wagging** — A dog that tucks her tail between her legs or wags it low to the ground and quickly may be showing you that she's nervous, anxious, insecure or feeling shy (the tucked-in position also prevents her scent from being released).

Research also suggests that when dogs feel stress, they tend to wag their tails to the left as a reflection of what's happening in the brain.⁴ Activation of the left-brain causes the tail to wag to the right; activation of the right brain produces a wag to the left.

In general, dogs may wag to the right side when they encounter something pleasant, but when they see something threatening, for example, a strange dog exhibiting dominant behaviors, they wag more to the left side. What do other tail positions mean among dogs?⁵

- A tail held high is a sign of dominance. The dog will release more of her scent from her anal glands this way, thus making her presence known
- A tail held high and wagging is often a sign of happiness
- A tail held horizontal to the ground means your dog is exploring

6. **Avoiding direct eye contact** — If your dog turns her head away from you or another dog, it may be to avoid making eye contact, which can be perceived as a sign of aggression or threat. However, domestic dogs may be more likely to make direct eye contact with humans than they are with socialized wolves, which suggests they've learned that it's a useful tool for communication.

In short, in an experiment in which socialized dogs and wolves were presented with a difficult task, dogs looked at humans, seemingly for guidance, while wolves did not. According to research published in the journal *Current Biology*:⁶

"Since looking behavior has an important function in initializing and maintaining communicative interaction in human communication systems, we suppose that by positive feedback processes ... [T]he readiness of dogs to look at the human face has led to complex forms of dog-human communication that cannot be achieved in wolves even after extended socialization."

7. **Licking another dog's muzzle** — When two dogs greet each other, the submissive dog may lower her head, avoid eye contact and lick the other dog's muzzle. This communicates that the dog is not a threat. Licking her own muzzle, such as a very quick lick of the nose or simply the tip of the tongue barely stuck quickly out of the mouth, is also a common calming signal used by dogs to diffuse stressful situations, promote peace and stave off aggression within the pack.

If you're interested in learning a new take on how to communicate with and understand your dog, check out my interview with Isla Fishburn, Ph.D., a holistic dog behaviorist and owner of Kachina Canine Communication in Northumberland, England.

She believes that a dog's emotional state is what drives its behavior, and that it's important to recognize that your dog is another species with its own methods of communication and needs for emotional and physical wellness. You can watch our interview in full below.

[Download Interview Transcript](#)

Sources and References

[VetStreet May 5, 2016](#)

¹ [VetStreet May 5, 2016](#)

² [Behavioural Processes 2015, 110 88-95](#)

³ [The Whole Dog Journal February 24, 2016](#)

⁴ [Current Biology, Vol. 23, Issue 22, November 2013](#)

⁵ [Animal Planet Dog Behavior](#)

⁶ [Curr Biol. 2003 Apr 29;13\(9\):763-6](#)
