

Do You Live With a Sensitive Dog?

Just like sensitive people, sensitive or anxious dogs tend to be more susceptible to stress and can be triggered by a number of factors. With anxiety affecting about 30% of dogs, know your pet's unique signals and what you can do to help her stay calm, including this No. 1 no-cost stress buster.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Skittish dogs, like nervous humans, can suffer from anxiety and stress; left unaddressed, anxiety can negatively affect your dog's health, quality of life and even her lifespan
- Common anxiety triggers for dogs include changes in routine, separation from or adverse relationships with other family members, and lack of opportunities to express natural behaviors
- Classic canine signs of anxiety include trembling or shaking, a tucked tail, ears pulled or pinned back, and whining
- While some anxiety triggers may be unavoidable, fortunately, there are many things you can take to reduce stressors in your dog's daily life

I'm sure most of you reading here today have met, or even have first-hand experience with a skittish dog, meaning a dog who is wary, jumpy, edgy, nervous — in other words, a dog who suffers from anxiety. If your own dog seems anxious, and you have no earthly idea why, you're not alone. The fact is, what stresses out your dog can be very different from the things you find stressful.

Stress Can Affect Your Dog's Health and Longevity

Research shows conclusively that dogs can and often do experience stress, and there is also evidence that living with a fear or anxiety disorder can negatively affect a dog's health and lifespan.¹

When your dog feels anxious, her body releases an overabundance of norepinephrine, the fight or flight hormone, which has the potential to alter gut bacteria and interfere with gastrointestinal (GI) tract motility.² This flood of norepinephrine can result in physical symptoms, one of which is **diarrhea**. A bout of diarrhea only exacerbates stress in housetrained dogs — especially if they have an accident indoors.

Some skittish dogs primarily experience short-lived stress, but others suffer long-term, chronic stress. The more you know about what triggers your pet's anxiety, the behaviors she tends to perform when she's anxious, and the effect of stress on her health, the better able you'll be to recognize the signs and take action to minimize or eliminate stressors.

Anxiety-Inducing Events and Situations

Some of the sources of stress in dogs are species-specific, while others are triggers that can cause anxiety in humans as well. And just like sensitive people, sensitive dogs generally tend to be more susceptible to stress. Some common triggers include:

- Changes in housing, household routine, or household members
- Punishment-based training methods involving yelling, hitting, shock collars, etc.
- Separation from family members, including other pets
- Sudden loud noises (e.g., fireworks, thunderstorms)
- Exposure to the strange and unfamiliar (objects, animals, people, etc.)
- Lack of opportunities to express normal species- and **breed-specific behaviors** such as running, retrieving, hunting, herding, etc.
- Adverse relationships with other pets or humans in the household
- Unwanted attention such as being randomly awakened from a nap, or being forcibly hugged, kissed or held

As you think about the possible triggers for own your dog's anxiety, be sure to consider his history. If you adopted him, what do you know about his past? Was he abused, unsocialized or neglected? Is he anxious mainly around men or kids? Other dogs?

Some of the things that cause anxiety in dogs can be unavoidable, such as a fear of thunderstorms or a move to a new home. However, there are also things within your control that can help minimize stress and improve your dog's quality of life.

- Dogs **left alone for several hours** during the day get lonely and bored. If there's often no one home to keep your dog company, recruit a friend or neighbor or hire a dog walker to take him for a stroll around the block, at a minimum. An alternative is doggy daycare.
- Increase your dog's daily physical activity level, since the vast majority of dogs, especially large breeds, don't get nearly enough. Daily movement is extremely important in mitigating your dog's stress response.
- Use only fear-free reinforcement behavior training/trainers.
- Ensure everyone in the family understands and respects your dog's need for uninterrupted sleep and human handling he feels comfortable with.

Anxiety Symptoms and Signals

Estimates are that about 30% of dogs show signs of anxiety, identified by either body language or behaviors such as obsessive licking. Since each dog has her own communication style, so it's important to learn your pet's signals that she's feeling nervous or stressed. There are many signs of anxiety in dogs, and they can change over time, including:³

- Trembling/shaking
- Increased whining, howling and/or barking
- Ears pulled or pinned back
- Cowering, crouched body posture and/or hiding

- Lowered or tucked tail
- Diarrhea
- Yawning or panting
- Reduced or absent appetite
- Nose or lip licking
- Destructive behaviors

If your dog is showing one or more signs that she's anxious, the first thing you should do is make an appointment with your veterinarian for a wellness checkup. It's important to rule out an underlying medical condition that may be the cause of or a contributor to the anxiety.

Suggestions to Help Calm a Skittish Dog

1. Make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise, playtime, exercise, mental stimulation, exercise, attention, affection, and did I mention exercise? Daily vigorous exercise is one of the most overlooked, free and effective treatments for reducing stress that very few pet parents take advantage of.
2. Consider adding a probiotic supplement or fermented veggies to your dog's fresh, nutritionally optimal, species-specific whole food diet, as studies show probiotics reduce stress-related GI disturbances in dogs.
3. When your dog will be home alone, leave him with an article of clothing or blanket with your scent on it and a treat-release toy, place small treats and his favorite toys around the house for him to discover, and put on some soothing doggy music before you leave.
4. Play calm, soothing music before a possible stressor occurs. This may relax your dog and have the added bonus of drowning out distressing noises.
5. Add a flower essence blend like Holistic Solutions Nervous Dog, Mellow Out, or Very Scary Things to her drinking water and invest in an Adaptil pheromone collar or diffuser.
6. Consult an integrative veterinarian about homeopathic and TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) remedies, Rescue Remedy, or other specific Bach flower remedies that could be helpful in alleviating your dog's intermittent stress. Products I use, always in conjunction with behavior modification, include homeopathic aconitum (or whatever remedy fits the symptoms best), Hyland's Calms Forte or calming milk proteins (variety of brands).

Calming nutraceuticals and herbs that can be of benefit include holy basil, L-theanine, rhodiola, bacopa, ashwagandha, GABA, 5-HTP and chamomile.

The essential oil of lavender has been proven to reduce the stress response in dogs. Place a few drops on your pet's collar or bedding before a stressor occurs or diffuse the oil around your house. There are also great oil blends specifically for calming animals. Always leave a room in your house un-diffused so your dog can choose the level of essential oils she wants.

7. If your dog responds well to pressure applied to her body, invest in a wrap like the Thundershirt; also consider Ttouch, a specific massage technique that can help anxious pets.
8. If your dog's anxiety seems to be getting worse instead of better, consider an individualized approach to managing her stress by allowing her to choose what best soothes her via applied zoopharmacognosy (self-healing techniques offered through a trained professional).

9. If you've adopted a dog who may have had a rocky start in life, I highly recommend a program called A Sound Beginning, which is designed to help rescue dogs and their adopters learn to communicate effectively and form an unbreakable bond.
10. Work with a force-free behaviorist or trainer to help identify anxiety triggers and develop a behavior repatterning protocol that can help reduce the level of stress your dog experiences when events occur. Some good resources to investigate are:
 - [Fear Free Pets Directory](#)
 - [Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers \(C.C.P.D.T.\)](#)
 - [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants \(I.A.A.B.C.\)](#)
 - [Karen Pryor Academy](#)
 - [Academy for Dog Trainers](#)
 - [Pet Professional Guild](#)

Sources and References

¹ [Applied Animal Behaviour Science, July 2010, Volume 125, Issues 3-4, Pages 157-162](#)

² [Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology, 2011 Dec;62\(6\):591-9](#)

³ [BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine](#)
