

Why Your Dog Likely Doesn't Care To Be Hugged

Some dogs tolerate and even appear comfortable with hugs, but hugging your pet can trigger negative emotions simply because dogs aren't wired for hugs. If your dog does either of these two things after a hug, take it as proof that she doesn't like to be hugged.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It comes as a surprise to many pet parents that their very huggable dogs probably don't much like being hugged
- Dogs aren't built for hugging, they're built for running, which they can't do while being hugged (constrained); this can trigger discomfort and stress in some canine companions
- Some dogs appear comfortable with hugs; it's important to carefully observe your dog and others you interact with to determine the types of touch they do and don't like
- Most dogs prefer petting to hugs, and research suggests they enjoy having their chests and shoulders petted, as well as the end of the spine just in front of the tail
- In all interactions with our animal companions, we should pay attention to the impact we're having on them, as each is an individual

As much as you love hugging your canine BFF, it's important to realize the feeling may not be mutual. In fact, this form of human affection isn't something most dogs enjoy, and it's easy to see why if you consider the differences between the physical structure of humans and dogs. While humans are clearly built for hugging — we stand erect and have arms instead of front legs — dogs stand on all fours and have no arms.

The fact that the physiology of dogs makes it virtually impossible for them to initiate or return hugs is a big clue they aren't designed for it — it isn't natural for them. Dogs who seem to enjoy being hugged are probably being good boys (or girls) who put up uncomplainingly with all their human's odd behaviors.

In reality, our dogs haven't a clue what we're doing when we hug them, but they trust us and love us unconditionally, so they don't put up a fuss.

Why Hugs Can Trigger Stress in Dogs

Dogs are cursorial animals, meaning their limbs are adapted for running. Dogs in the wild spend a lot of time running — running after food, for example, or running from predators. When you hug your furry friend, you restrict her and remove her ability to escape, and for many dogs, this is a stress trigger.

Psychology professor and neuropsychological researcher Stanley Coren, Ph.D., author of the best-selling book "The Intelligence of Dogs," in an article for Psychology Today, explains it this way:

"... [I]n times of stress or threat the first line of defense that a dog uses is not his teeth, but rather his ability to run away. Behaviorists believe that depriving a dog of that course of action by immobilizing him with a hug can increase his stress level and, if the dog's anxiety becomes significantly intense, he may bite."¹

Coren, surprised to find so little published literature on a concept that is common knowledge among behaviorists, used an internet search engine to locate 250 random photos of people hugging dogs. The images had to clearly show the dog's face and could not involve other factors that might raise a dog's stress level.

He studied the photos and found that nearly 82% showed dogs displaying at least one sign of stress, discomfort or anxiety. Just under 11% of the photos showed dogs who appeared neutral or ambivalent about being hugged, while just over 7% showed dogs that appeared comfortable with the hug.

"I can summarize the data quite simply by saying that the results indicated that the internet contains many pictures of happy people hugging what appear to be unhappy dogs," Coren wrote.

Are Some Dogs Okay With Hugs?

Obviously, not everyone agrees with Coren. For example, as companion animal behavior therapist Corey Cohen told the New York Times, "My dogs love being hugged."² He says when he hugs his dog, the dog's breathing slows and his gaze softens, which are signs of tension release. Some dogs even appear to smile when hugged. The difference may be due to trust and the depth of your relationship with the dog being hugged.

I think it also has to do with a dog's individual personality. Just as there are some people who don't enjoy being hugged, I think there are some dogs that simply prefer being petted over being hugged.

So even if you're convinced your own dog is comfortable being hugged, or even shows signs she enjoys it, in reality, she may not. I recommend taking the time to carefully note her response to your hugs, even subtle changes, and stop if she seems uncomfortable. It's generally not a good idea to hug a dog you don't know.

It's not only hugs that can be stressful to dogs, by the way. Petting your dog in certain places, like on the head or paw, may also be unpleasant for her.³

Have You Ever Wondered How Petting Feels to Your Dog?

Dog-to-dog interaction involves lots of physical contact. They do it to show affection and a desire for play, but they also make contact when trying to goad or threaten another dog. This is why some forms of human petting elicit pleasure and a sense of calm in dogs, while other types of touching can send the wrong message.

Unless you're carefully observing her as you pet her, it's easy to inadvertently trigger negative emotions in your dog. Different types of petting, for example, a scratch behind the dog's ear or a pat on the head, feel pretty much the same to us. The dog, however, isn't necessarily having the same experience.

A 2014 study evaluated the physiological and behavioral responses in dogs to determine which types of petting felt good to them, and which didn't.⁴ The research involved 28 privately owned dogs of different breeds, ages, and backgrounds.

Each dog was fitted with a heart rate monitor and brought into a room where both the owner and a stranger were present. The owner was instructed to ignore what was going on while the stranger interacted with the dog, touching him or her in 9 different ways for 30 seconds at a time. The 9 different touches included:

1. Petting the shoulder
2. Petting the lateral side of the chest
3. Petting the ventral part of the neck
4. Petting and holding the lying dog on the ground
5. Holding a forepaw
6. Petting on the top of the head
7. Scratching at the base of the tail
8. Holding the collar
9. Covering the muzzle with one hand

Dogs REALLY Don't Enjoy Being Constrained

When the dogs were petted on the head or paw, they showed appeasement signals and redirected behaviors. The researchers interpreted those reactions as signs the dogs were uncomfortable.

It's worth noting that appeasement signals aren't always indicators of stress. According to Whole Dog Journal:

*"They are important everyday communication tools for keeping peace in social hierarchies, and are often presented in calm, stress-free interactions. They are offered in a social interaction to promote the tranquility of the group and the safety of the group's members. When offered in conjunction with other behaviors, they can be an indicator of stress as well."*⁵

When the dogs were constrained by being held while lying on the ground, held by the collar, or having their muzzle covered, unsurprisingly, they showed freezing and displacement behaviors. These included lifting a paw, looking or moving away, and lip licking. All the dogs also had elevated heart rates — a clear sign of stress.

When the interactions were over, the dogs immediately shook their bodies and stretched, which are signs of relief and further proof they didn't enjoy being constrained, no matter how gentle the touch. It's worth noting that some dogs surely feel constrained during hugging.

The touches the dogs liked included having their chests and shoulders petted and getting a nice scratch at the end of the spine just in front of the tail.

Dog Petting Tips

Most dogs tolerate a lot more handling from their immediate human family members, including touching that is decidedly unnatural for canines, such as hugging and kissing, than they do from strangers.

However, it's not uncommon for dog parents to miss their own dogs' stress signals, which can include a quick head turn or lick of the upper lip, as well as freezing in place. It can be easy to miss or misinterpret some of the more subtle canine expressions of distress.

Unfortunately, the result can be a difficult relationship between human and dog that in a worst-case scenario can even become dangerous. Suggestions for enhancing your relationship with your dog through touch:

- Let your dog initiate contact most of the time, rather than invading his personal space. Some dogs need a little time to settle themselves before getting physically close enough to be touched.
- Pet your dog gently on the chest or behind the ear closest to you (to avoid reaching over her head for the other ear). Always avoid petting that involves reaching over or across your dog.
- As a general rule, it's never a good idea to hug a dog. Some dogs tolerate it, but it's a form of constraint, which feels threatening to them.
- Stop petting your dog after a short time and see if she asks for more or seems relieved and/or moves away.
- Watch for stress signals, including looking away, lip licking, yawning, ears back, "whale eye" (the white of the eye is showing at the corners and/or rim), lifting a paw, tail tucking, freezing, or urination. If your dog is doing one or more of these things, stop touching him and give him some space.
- Always ask the dog's human before interacting with a pet you don't know.

In all interactions with our animal companions, we should pay attention to the impact we're having on them and most importantly, be respectful of who they are. Each dog is an individual, and while one dog may love a vigorous rubdown, another may be completely stressed out by that type of handling.

Additionally, there are some dogs that experience anxiety and fear when approached by strangers, in general. There's an organization trying to promote the identification of these dogs from a distance by using a yellow ribbon on a leash, through **The Yellow Dog Project**, which I wholeheartedly endorse.

By observing your dog's reaction to physical contact and following his lead, you can enhance your bond with him and forge a more positive relationship.

Sources and References

¹ [Psychology Today April 13, 2016](#)

² [The New York Times April 27, 2016](#)

^{3,4} [Kuhne, F. et al. Journal of Veterinary Behavior, May-June 2014, Vol 9, Iss 3, pp 93-97](#)

⁵ [Whole Dog Journal, August 2011](#)