

Is Your Dog Feeling Down?

Unveil the hidden emotional struggles your dog might be facing, even when they seem fine on the surface.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The jury is still out on whether our canine companions suffer from clinical depression similar to the condition in humans, but many dogs definitely experience mood and behavior changes
- Behavior changes that can signal depression in dogs include sleeping more, diminished interest in eating, playing, and socializing, and increased anxiety and clinginess
- If your dog seems depressed, it's a good idea to consult your veterinarian to rule out a potential underlying medical condition
- If your furry BFF isn't getting enough time or attention from her human family, it can increase her risk for depression
- Things you can do to help your sad dog feel better include sticking to a consistent daily routine, and offering distractions rather than reinforcement for his depressed mood

Dogs can sometimes seem moody or sad, which often takes the form of behavior changes. Since such changes are typically temporary and linked to a recent event in the dog's life, no one really knows whether our canine friends suffer from depression like we do.

Diagnosing clinical depression (which is distinct from transient episodes of depressed behavior) is challenging even in humans, because there's no biological measure that identifies the condition. MDs depend to a large extent on what their patients tell them about how they're feeling to arrive at a diagnosis.

Since we can't get that kind of input from a pet, we're left to rely on our powers of observation to determine if a dog is unhappy. Generally speaking, when a vet or veterinary behaviorist describes a patient as "depressed," the dog is displaying a change in normal behavior.

"Signs your dog is depressed can be subtle, often starting with a gradual loss of interest in once-loved games, a few extra naps, and a declining appetite," writes Kate O'Connor, executive editor of the Whole Dog Journal.

"Depression in dogs also can start with a bang, such as finding a previously outgoing and well-mannered dog hiding in the closet, ripping up shoes, or growling at old friends."¹

Behaviors to Watch for, and Ruling Out a Medical Problem

Depression takes different forms depending on the dog, but a common theme is a significant behavioral change. O'Connor lists some of the more common signs:

- Lethargy/sleeping more
- Lack of appetite
- Lack of interest in preferred activities/toys
- Increase in destructive behavior
- Unwilling to socialize
- Hiding
- Short-tempered
- Increased anxiety/clinging to owner

Whenever a dog's behavior changes, it's a good idea to check in with your veterinarian. Many changes in behavior that can signal depression (e.g., loss of appetite, accidents in the house, sleeping a lot, sudden aggressive behavior in a dog who has never shown aggression), can also be signs of a variety of underlying medical conditions.

If your dog gets a clean bill of health from your veterinarian, there are things you can do to help your canine BFF feel better.

Potential Causes of Depression in Dogs

As O'Connor points out, serious depression in dogs is typically the result of trauma, abuse, or extended isolation.

"Shutting out the world can be a survival strategy in these extremes and can carry over even when the dog has been removed from the environment that caused the trauma," she writes. "Building trust with the dog and seeking expert advice are extremely important when working with an animal whose depression likely stemmed from a deeply traumatic experience."

A more common reason for a dog's depression is feeling ignored. When our human-centric lives get very busy and stressful, the family member who most often gets forgotten is the dog. If your canine companion is getting lost in the shuffle of your busy life, it could be the reason he's blue. Signs your canine companion needs more of your time and attention:

- **He's sleeping more than normal** — An otherwise healthy young or adult dog who sleeps the day away is bored and in need of physical exercise and playtime, as well as **mental stimulation**.

Try to set aside an hour a day to focus on your dog. Take walks (and don't check your phone), head to the dog park, go running together, or play a lively game of fetch. Also consider enrolling your dog in an obedience class or a canine activity like agility or nose work to keep him mentally challenged.

- **She's getting into mischief around the house** — If your canine companion suddenly starts relieving herself indoors, it could be a sign she's stressed, but there might also be an underlying health problem, so I recommend a visit to your veterinarian to rule out a medical condition.

If she gets a clean bill of health, then it's probably safe to assume she's in need of more of your time and attention. If she's also starting to be destructive or disruptive around the house, it's almost a sure bet she needs more from you.

If part of the problem is that she's alone all day while you work, consider hiring a dog walker to take her out for a stroll mid-day. You might also see if there's a doggy daycare in your area where she could spend a few hours a week interacting with other dogs.

You'll also want to ensure she's getting enough daily exercise and mental stimulation to keep her in balance. Remember, a tired dog is a good dog!

- **He's getting fat** — Dogs in the wild spend most of their waking hours hunting down their next meal. Dogs in our homes spend most of their awake time eating what we feed them and looking for a good spot to nap. The result is an epidemic of **overweight and obese dogs**, and we have no one to blame but ourselves.

If you're overfeeding or over-treating your dog as a way to soothe your own guilt over not spending enough time with him, remember that food is a lousy substitute for your time and attention.

- **She's disobedient** — Dogs naturally want to please their humans, so if your pooch is giving you attitude, it's a good bet you need to spend more time with her. It could be she needs an obedience refresher course, or it's possible you haven't discovered what truly motivates her.

Some breeds are more eager to please than others, so if your dog has an independent nature, you'll need to learn how to get her attention. Many dogs are bored, so find activities you both can enjoy on a daily basis.

- **He's still not housetrained** — While it's true some dogs are easier to house train than others, an adult dog who has frequent accidents indoors isn't getting the time and attention he needs to learn that all peeing and pooping is done outside.

Following a very consistent "time for your walk" routine, crate training as necessary, and positive behavior reinforcement are the keys to success in housetraining.

Something else to consider for a melancholy pooch is gut health. Dogs with dysbiosis or microbiome imbalances may not be making adequate serotonin, which can affect mood and behavior. Transitioning to a more nutritious, balanced fresh food diet provides important dietary diversity that contributes to a resilient gut.

5 Tips for Helping a Depressed Dog

1. **Keep daily routines as consistent as possible** — Pets do best when they know what to expect from one day to the next. Try to keep mealtimes, exercise, walks, playtime, grooming, bedtime, and other daily activities on a consistent schedule.
2. **Keep your dog's diet and mealtimes the same and spice up what's on the menu** — It's important to continue to offer him the same food he's used to, at the same time each day, but if you find your dog isn't interested in eating much, consider offering enticing nibbles of new, healthy foods. Try a yummy **knucklebone** for dessert, or make a tasty treat for training time that he hasn't had before.

Store what he doesn't eat in the fridge and offer it to him again at his next regularly scheduled mealtime. Use his hunger to help him get his appetite back by resisting the urge to entice him with unhealthy food toppers.

3. **Be careful not to inadvertently reward your dog's depression** — It's only natural to want to comfort your sad pet, but unfortunately, giving attention to a dog who is displaying an undesirable behavior can reinforce the behavior.

Obviously, the last thing you want to do is reward a lack of appetite, inactivity, or other types of depressed behavior in your dog. Instead, you want to help her over the hump.

A better idea is to try to distract her with healthy, fun activities that provide opportunities for positive behavior reinforcement. This can be a walk, short training sessions, a game of fetch, **nose work**, or offering her a food puzzle toy or a relaxing massage.

4. **Give it time** — Your dog's depression may take a few days or even weeks to blow over, but eventually most pets return to their normal lively selves. If at any point you feel your pet is suffering unnecessarily or there is something more going on than a case of the blues, I recommend discussing the situation with your vet or a veterinary behaviorist.
5. **Use natural remedies, if needed** — There are some excellent herbal and Bach flower remedies that can be administered to your depressed dog until you see an emotional shift for the better.

Some of my favorites include homeopathic Ignatia, Jackson Galaxy's Holistic Solutions, several Bach flower remedies including Mustard, and Green Hope Farm Grief and Loss. I also use the herbs ashwagandha and St. John's wort.

Sources and References

[PetMD, November 29, 2021](#)

¹ [Whole Dog Journal, March 25, 2024](#)
