

When You Do This, Your Dog Likely Thinks ‘Please Stop’

As much as humans love to do this to dogs, a whopping 82% were found to experience elevated stress levels in response. Test your dog the next time you do it and watch for these 9 tell-tale signs.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Hugging a dog can make him feel confined and stressed out
- Nearly 82% of photos of people hugging their dogs showed dogs giving off at least one sign of stress, discomfort or anxiety
- It's generally not a good idea to hug a dog you don't know, and you should take the time to notice your own pet's response to your hugs and stop if he seems uncomfortable

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Should you hug your dog? It depends on whom you ask. The average dog lover would probably say a resounding, “yes!” But what would your dog say? This is the most important question and one that many people neglect to consider before wrapping their arms around their furry friend.

Some dogs surely adore hugs but others not so much. Even dogs that seemingly love hugs may only be tolerating them in reality, and virtually all dogs may be uncomfortable with hugs if they're in a stressful or unfamiliar situation.

Canine researcher Stanley Coren, Ph.D., professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia, recently set off a firestorm on social media for suggesting that most dogs don't like to be hugged. You might not want to believe it, but he used a fairly convincing argument to back it up and poses some questions worth thinking about.

Dogs Are Cursorial Animals and Hugs May Stress Them Out

That is, their limbs are adapted for running, as in, running away from potential threats. When you envelop your dog in a big bear hug, what can he *not* do? Run away. For many dogs, this is a stressful situation. Coren explained:¹

“... [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.”

Coren was surprised to find that there was very little published literature to back up this common notion among behaviorists. So, he “Googled” it. He viewed 250 random photos of people hugging their dogs. The photos had to clearly show the dog’s face and could not involve other factors that might raise a dog’s stress level.

He then assessed the photos for signs of stress in the dogs. Nearly 82% of the photos showed dogs giving off at least one sign of stress, discomfort or anxiety.

Just under 11% of the photos showed dogs that seemed to be ambiguous or neutral to hugging, 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 said.²

Signs of a Stressed Dog

It’s relatively easy to determine if your dog is one that loves or loathes hugs, once you know the **stress signs** to look for. If your dog does any of the following when you hug him, he may be anxious, stressed or uncomfortable:

- Baring teeth
- Turns his head away from you
- Closes eyes, at least partially
- Half-moon eye or “whale eye” (showing the white portion of the eyes near the rim)
- Lowers or slicks back his ears
- Licks his lips or your face
- Yawns
- Raises a paw
- Shakes off after the hug

Coren believes the photos on the internet likely display what pet owners believe are happy photos with their pets, and notes that many people have difficulty reading their dog’s facial expressions, especially when signs of stress and anxiety are involved. He stressed that hugs are best kept for humans and not dogs:³

“The clear recommendation to come out of this research is to save your hugs for your two-footed family members and lovers. It is clearly better from the dog’s point of view if you express your fondness for your pet with a pat, a kind word, and maybe a treat.”

Might Hugs Relax Some Dogs?

There are two sides to every story, of course, and in some cases far more than that. Many people chimed in with their opinions in response to Coren’s non-scientific study, including companion animal behavior therapist Corey Cohen. He told the New York Times quite simply, “My dogs love being hugged.”⁴

According to Cohen, when he hugs his dog, his 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 your dog's unique personality. Just like 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 perhaps your pooch feels comfortable being hugged, or even shows signs he enjoys it. On the other hand, he may not. I recommend you take the time to notice his response to your hugs and stop if he seems uncomfortable. It's generally not a good idea to hug a dog you don't know.

It's not only hugs that might be stressful to dogs, by the way. Petting your dog in certain places, like on the head or paw, may also be unpleasant for him, according to research published in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*.⁵

What Type of Touch Do Dogs Enjoy?

Many dogs enjoy being petted, and every dog may have slightly different preferences. In general, however, most dogs enjoy being pet on the chest or behind the ear closest to you (this means you do not have to reach over their head, which may be stressful to some dogs).

Ideally young animals can be respectfully and gently conditioned to having all parts of their bodies touched without a stress response. If puppies don't experience positive paw petting and touching episodes as youngsters they may have apprehensions about having their paws touched as adults, especially if touching paws was correlated with a scary or painful experience, like a bad nail trim.

If you didn't expose your dog to these experiences early on or adopted an adult dog that is clearly uncomfortable being touched in certain places it's important to be respectful of their apprehensions. Many dogs can learn to overcome their fears of being touched through a series of gentle desensitization steps. Ask a positive dog trainer or **behaviorist** about the best approach for your dog's specific fears.

When done with respect and care, both owners and their pets can benefit. One study found dog owners' blood pressure decreased and levels of the "love" hormone oxytocin and other feel-good hormones increased after 30 minutes spent talking to, stroking, scratching and petting their dogs.⁶

Better still, feel-good hormone levels rose in the dogs, too, which suggests that they equally enjoyed the interactions with their owners. Of note, there was no hugging required!

Sources and References

^{1,2,3} [Psychology Today April 13, 2016](#)

⁴ [The New York Times April 27, 2016](#)

⁵ [Journal of Veterinary Behavior, May-June 2014, Vol 9, Iss 3, pp 93-97](#)

⁶ [Veterinary Journal, May 2003, 165\(3\):296-301](#)
