

## 5 Mistakes Which Can Make Your Dog Depressed, Are You Guilty of Them?

Of course, you don't intend to - yet they can leave your furry friend feeling down in the dumps. Here are 5 things you can do to turn things around, and why, if you're not making any of these errors, it may be a sign of something far worse.

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs may or may not experience depression as we understand it, but they definitely experience mood and behavior changes that can lead a pet parent to worry their dog is depressed
- Reasons your dog may feel depressed include an underlying medical problem, lack of exercise, loss of a family member or a pet he was bonded to, and punitive rather than positive reinforcement behavior training
- Tips to help a depressed dog include keeping daily routines and mealtimes consistent, distracting her with healthy, fun activities, and offering natural remedies if necessary

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Science hasn't figured out yet whether dogs suffer from depression in the same way people do. They certainly experience mood and behavior changes, but those changes are usually temporary and traceable to a recent event in the dog's life. For example, perhaps the kiddos just headed back to school after a summer spent swimming and playing with their dog, and she misses having them around. Or maybe you've just added a puppy to the family and your older dog is feeling left out.

Dogs who suffer the loss of a family member (human or pet) often go through a grieving period. And of course many dogs abandoned at shelters suffer a period of sadness and uncertainty.

The problem with diagnosing clinical depression (which is different from short-lived episodes of depressed behavior) is that even in humans, there's no biological test to identify the condition. Medical doctors take note of symptoms and what the patient tells them about their feelings to arrive at a diagnosis.

Since dogs can't talk to us, we must rely on our powers of observation to determine if a canine companion is feeling down in the dumps. Generally speaking, when a vet or veterinary behaviorist describes a patient as depressed, the dog is displaying a change in normal behavior.

### 6 Reasons Dogs Get Depressed

1. **She's dealing with an undiagnosed medical problem** — If your dog's behavior changes, even if you suspect you know why, it's always a good idea to check in with your veterinarian. Many changes in behavior

symptomatic of depression, including lack of appetite, potty accidents in the house, sleeping more than usual, reluctance to exercise and sudden aggressive behavior in a dog who has never shown aggression, can also be signs of any number of underlying medical conditions.

2. **He's feeling ignored** — A healthy dog who is feeling depressed may lose interest in eating or playing, become destructive, have accidents in the house or stop running to greet you when you come through the door. Like a sleepy, sluggish dog, a depressed pooch often just needs more quality time with his human.

Get into the habit of spending an uninterrupted hour with your dog each day engaging in physical pursuits, grooming rituals, training exercises and good old tummy rubs. It will lighten both your moods!

3. **She's not getting enough exercise** — Sadly, some dogs become socially inhibited when they aren't getting enough exercise and playtime. This can take the form of a decrease in interaction with other family members, or choosing to isolate themselves in their crate or another room. If your normally happy dog suddenly isn't, consider the possibility that she needs more exercise.

Most dogs need much more physical activity than their owners realize. Your dog should be getting an absolute minimum of 20 minutes of sustained heart-thumping exercise three times a week. Thirty minutes is better than 20, and six or seven days a week is better than three.

Minimum exercise requirements prevent muscle atrophy, but don't necessarily build muscle mass, strengthen tendons and ligaments, hone balance and proprioception, or enhance cardiovascular fitness, which is why more is always better. If you can provide your dog daily walks as well as additional daily training sessions to meet your other exercise goals, even better!

4. **He's suffered the loss of a human family member or pet** — It's not unusual for dogs to grieve the loss of a person or animal friend they are bonded with. According to the late Dr. Sophia Yin, a veterinarian and applied animal behavior specialist, dogs feel the same basic emotions humans do, including grief, fear, anger, happiness, sadness and even possessiveness.

When a dog is mourning a loss, depression is common. Signs of depression in dogs mimic those in people — sleeping more than normal, moving more slowly, eating less and showing a limited interest in playing.

If your dog seems depressed at the loss of a person or animal he was close to, engage him in activities he enjoys, such as a walk, a game of fetch or a trip to the dog park. It's really a matter of distracting him with things he enjoys until sufficient time has passed and he's no longer looking around every corner for the one who is now absent from his life.

And it's best not to expect a quick fix. It can take from a few weeks to a few months before your dog's depressed mood begins to lift.

5. **Her favorite human is depressed** — Your dog is very observant of your emotional state, which she can detect by observing the tone of your voice, your body language and other subtle clues, including your pheromones (how you smell). The way you move, speak and behave all send subtle signals to your dog that indicate your mood.

For example, when you're in a situation that's stressful to your dog, such as at your veterinarian's office, she'll look to you to help her calm down. If, however, you seem tense and nervous, she'll likely become even more anxious. Your dog is extremely intuitive; so if you're feeling blue, don't be surprised if she seems depressed as well.

6. **He's being subjected to punitive behavior training** — Dogs who are punished for undesirable behavior instead of being rewarded for positive behavior may stop interacting with their owners in an attempt to avoid punishment. They adopt a depressive state of mind called "learned helplessness" because they feel powerless to avoid negative situations.

I can't stress strongly enough the importance of positive reinforcement behavior training, not only to help your dog become a good canine citizen, but also to preserve and protect the close and priceless bond you share with him.

## 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. Exercise is a powerful tool to help increase your pooch's endorphins, or "feel good" hormones. Lots of walks (with plenty of opportunities to sniff) can be a powerful mood enhancer.
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 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 **recreational bone**.

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 homeopathic and Bach flower remedies that can be easily administered to your depressed dog until you see an emotional shift for the better. Some of my favorites include homeopathic Ignatia, several Bach flower remedies including Mustard and Honeysuckle, and Green Hope Farm Grief and Loss.

## Sources and References