

## A Telltale Sign Your Pet Feels Heartfelt Empathy with You

Dogs are known to respond to people when they cry. They can tell whether you're friendly, threatening, or when it's time to ask for a belly rub. But can you read the telltale sign your pet is ready to share a listening ear and profound empathy with you when you're at your lowest?

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Your pets are very observant of your emotional state, which they can pick up via your voice, body language and other subtle clues
- Dogs can discriminate emotional expressions of human faces in a controlled experiment, which they do by using their memories of real emotional human faces
- Pets are extremely intuitive. Dogs appear to process emotional cues and meanings of words in different hemispheres of the brain, similar to humans
- If you're stressed out and tense, your pet may become more anxious and agitated
- Regularly managing your stress will indirectly benefit your pet by creating a calmer, more relaxed household

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published June 17, 2016.***

Your mood and emotions matter to everyone in your household, including your pets. A dog living in a household with a lot of yelling and tension may become stressed, fearful, anxious or aggressive. On the other hand, a happy, relaxed household signals to your pets that it's OK to relax.

Your pets are, in fact, very observant of your emotional state, which they can pick up via your voice, body language and other subtle clues. It's in their best interest to do so, as being able to decipher your emotional expressions gives him a leg up (pun intended!) in evaluating your motivations and intentions.

Are you friendly? Are you a threat? Is it a good time to ask for a belly rub? Your dog may pick up your mood not only for her own devices but also for your benefit. Dogs are known, for instance, to respond to people when they cry.

They do this by approaching and displaying submissive behaviors, which is a signal that they're showing empathy.<sup>1</sup>

### Dogs Can Tell the Difference Between Angry and Happy Faces

Does your dog wag her tail in glee when you arrive home with a big smile and lots of ear scratches to give? And does she, in turn, hang back or crawl into her bed when you're angry or yelling? She may also run up and lick your face or roll onto her back when you're sad and crying.

These behaviors aren't a coincidence; your dog can likely discriminate between your different emotional expressions.

According to research published in the journal *Current Biology*, dogs can discriminate emotional expressions of human faces in a controlled experiment, which they do by using their memories of real emotional human faces.<sup>2</sup>

Research published in *Biology Letters* also found dogs recognize both dog and human emotions.<sup>3</sup> The dogs were presented with either human or dog faces with different expressions (happy and playful versus angry and aggressive). The faces were paired with a vocalization that was positive, negative or neutral.

The dogs looked significantly longer at the faces that matched up to the appropriate vocalization, which is an ability previously thought to be distinct to humans. The researchers concluded:

*“These results demonstrate that dogs can extract and integrate bimodal sensory emotional information, and discriminate between positive and negative emotions from both humans and dogs.”*

## **Pets Are Sensitive to Shifts in Your Mood**

The way you move, speak and behave all send subtle signals to your pets that indicate your mood. When you're in a situation that's stressful to your dog, such as at your veterinarian's office, your pet will look to you to help her calm down.

If however, you seem tense and nervous, your pet will likely become even anxious. This is true of your veterinarian as well — his or her energy can either calm or agitate your pet, so it's important to choose a provider who uses deliberate body language and communication to help put your pet at ease.

Pets are extremely intuitive. Dogs appear to process emotional cues and meanings of words in different hemispheres of the brain, similar to humans.

Dogs also pay attention to your body language, taking note of your posture and eye contact, so recognize that your pets may sense changes to your vibe even when you don't think you're being overtly emotional.

## **9 Tips to Reduce Your (and Thereby Your Pet's) Stress**

When you reduce your own stress, you thereby reduce your pet's stress. The following tips can help you adjust your mood for the better:<sup>4</sup>

1. **Interact with your pet** — Cuddling with your pet, petting her, or playing a game of fetch is calming for both of you. Better yet, take your dog for a walk, which adds the stress-busting benefits of exercise into the mix.
2. **Breathe slowly and intentionally** — When you breathe deeply, it stimulates your parasympathetic system, which lowers your heart rate and blood pressure and helps you relax.
3. **Try meditation** — Meditation helps to lower levels of anxiety and depression and improve symptoms of stress-related disorders.<sup>5</sup> You can also try mindfulness, which is a less formal variation of meditation that involves actively paying attention to the moment you're in right now.
4. **Play calming music** — Pets and people respond to music in similar ways, and both of you can benefit from the stress-relieving benefits of calming music.
5. **Take five minutes to recharge** — When your day is getting overly hectic, take five minutes to stop and regroup. You might step outside to get some sunshine and fresh air, read a few inspirational quotes, jot down

your thoughts in a journal or have a chat with a positive person.

6. **Engage in meaningful activities** — Having a sense of purpose and focus is important to your emotional well-being. Try a new hobby, volunteer, or mentor those in need or join a local community group, such as a church or recreational club.
7. **Nurture your human relationships** — Pets provide unconditional companionship and love, but it's important to develop strong relationships with other humans too. Take time to nurture important relationships and create new ones throughout your life.
8. **Get support when stress is overwhelming** — If you feel you're nearing burnout and can't cope, get help. This might mean talking to your spouse, another family member or a friend, or you may want to seek the help of a therapist.
9. **Tap** — Also called Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), this simple exercise can have profound benefits that decrease your anxiety level and overall attitude about stressful or negative situations or thoughts. For more information, check out Dr. Mercola's website on **EFT**. This technique can also benefit **pets**!

## 4 Stress Relief Tips for Your Dog

You're not the only one who might need some stress relief. The tips that follow are especially useful when you know your dog is going into a stressful situation, such as trip to the veterinarian or groomer.

1. **Exercise your dog right before the stressful event** — Vigorous activity will tire your dog out, which will help to relieve his nervous energy later.
2. **Add a flower essence blend** like Stress Stopper by Spirit Essences, Anxiety by Green Hope Farms, or Stress and Trauma Relief from OptiBalance to your dog's drinking water. Homeopathic Aconitum may also help.
3. **Invest in an Adaptil collar or diffuser for your dog** — Adaptil is a pheromone and is designed to have a calming affect on dogs. The collar seems to work well for many dogs suffering from stress-related behaviors. Put the collar on your dog the morning of the stressful event and remove it just before the event begins.
4. **Offer an earthing mat** — Providing a means for your pet to ground out and reduce EMFs may reduce stress in a variety of physiologic ways, especially if you live in a condo or apartment off the ground, live in an area with significant weather extremes or have a home full of electronics.

If you're a cat owner, don't worry — homeopathic, herbal or nutraceutical remedies can be helpful for kitties too. Talk with your integrative veterinarian about stress-relief options for your cat. Feliway spray or diffusers can offer calming pheromones to stressed felines.

Blended flower essences, such as Spirit Essences or several Green Hope Farms Essences, are often effective for cats, too. And remember, your mood matters! The more you display relaxed, happy behaviors, the more likely your pet is to follow suit.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Animal Cognition 15\(5\):851-9](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Curr Biol. 2015 Mar 2;25\(5\):601-5](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Biol Lett. 2016 Jan;12\(1\):20150883](#)

<sup>4</sup> [dvm360, August 28, 2015](#)

