

# Stress triggers



Could your actions be adding to your dog's anxiety or behavioral challenges? Consider whether you might be doing any of the following:

**Punishments.** Dogs learn by opportunities, so the best approach is to remove tempting situations rather than relying on punishment. For example, if trash or personal items are left where your dog can reach them, they'll naturally explore the appealing scents and assume it's fair game. To prevent problems, keep valuable or tempting items out of reach and properly stored.

**You repeatedly say "no."** Simply telling your dog "no" often only interrupts the behavior temporarily without teaching what you actually want them to do. If the dog stops briefly but quickly repeats the action, the verbal cue served more as a pause than genuine guidance. To see this in action, try saying a neutral word like "pickle" instead of "no"—the same pattern usually occurs. The key is to redirect your dog toward the behavior you do want. Rewarding or guiding them into the correct action teaches them what's expected and helps reduce frustration for both you and your dog.

**Communication.** Animals rely heavily on body language to communicate and are remarkably skilled at reading ours. Unless you've explicitly taught your dog cues like "drop it," "leave it," "get it," or "come," they may not understand these commands. Using them prematurely can cause stress, as your dog struggles to interpret what you want and may feel confused or frustrated.

**Physical Affection.** You hug or kiss your dog.

Imagine how you'd feel if someone held you in place against your will or smothered you with hugs and kisses—especially if they were a stranger. Most dogs feel the same way. Hugging or kissing, particularly when restraining them, can make your dog feel trapped and less trusting of you.

**Staring.** Maintaining direct, prolonged eye contact can come across as confrontational to a dog. In canine body language, a fixed stare often signals intent to engage, which isn't always perceived as friendly or safe.

**Pointing.** Often, this gesture is accompanied by leaning over your dog, which can make them feel uneasy. The so-called "guilty look" isn't a sign that your dog actually feels guilty—it's simply a response to feeling uncomfortable or stressed in that moment.

**You say "get down" when your dog is jumping.**

Consider what "down" actually means to your dog. Typically, it refers to a position where the belly is on the floor. So when your dog jumps and you say "down," are you expecting a full belly-down position or just all four paws on the ground? To avoid confusion, choose a distinct cue—like "off" or "four on floor"—and consistently teach your dog the behavior it represents. The specific word doesn't matter; you could even use something like "purple," as long as you show and reward the action. (See No. 3.)

**You don't let sleeping dogs lie.** Just like people, dogs value their rest. Disturbing a dog while it's sleeping can cause stress and irritation, so it's important to respect their downtime.

**You tell your dog, "It's OK."** While this can be reassuring in some cases, most owners tend to say it only when something stressful or unpleasant is happening. Over time, your dog may start to associate this phrase with danger, making it a cue to become anxious or alert. A more effective approach is to teach your dog coping strategies for situations that trigger fear or stress.

