

Signs of Stress

Our dogs are always speaking to us, but not in ways we always understand. Most of their language is nonverbal. Of course, they use audio signals such as whines and barks and an assortment of other sounds, but most of what they say is through body language. If you think about it, we as humans do the same thing. You can tell someone doesn't want to stand next to you by the way they move or position their body, or don't like the looks of something by the expression on their face. It is important for us to understand our dog's body language as this contributes to their overall health and happiness.

We all know that stress is detrimental to our health and longevity. The same is true for our dogs. You may love your job, but I am sure you still have bad days at work, and even if not, you still take days off and even take vacations. God even made a Sabbath day for mankind to rest, and this included the animals too! It is important that we do not overwork our dogs when doing therapy work, and to recognize when our dogs are stressed or just plain tired and need a break.

Hopefully this article will help you to see stress signals in our dogs. But keep in mind that these signals may vary from dog to dog and in different situations. For example, some dogs will yawn in one type of stressful situation but then pant in another type. Or even in the same situation they may use a different signal from day to day. These signals can be very subtle and if you miss them, they may start to use more and basically "stack" them. If a dog yawns to say he is stressed and you do nothing, he may begin panting, and then pacing, and so on. Some dogs may give a subtle sign and if you do nothing, they may accept their situation and give no more signals, but this does not mean they are ok with the situation!

Doing therapy work can be fun and rewarding for both dog and human. But it IS WORK. We need to be able to understand when our dog is feeling stressed or is ready to stop for the day, or even to retire from therapy work all together. My best advice is to stop when they are still having fun. Do various types of therapy work to not only figure out what your dog likes best but to also keep it interesting (although some dogs may like the security of doing the same thing every time!).

Never work such a long day that they get tired or stressed. It is better to keep it short and keep them wanting more. The length of time spent doing therapy work that a dog can handle can vary greatly from dog to dog, and even in what types of therapy work you do. For example, being a reading buddy may be easier for a dog than visiting a memory care or depression unit. Some more active dogs may be bored (and stressed) by the inactivity of being a reading buddy and may do better by visiting hospitals and walking from room to room and greeting a new person in each room.

Here is a list of common stress signals, in no particular order (this list is not all inclusive, there may be others not mentioned here that your dog may use):

- Panting and/or drooling
- Yawning
- Tail down or tucked tail
- Looking away and/or moving away
- Putting back towards you or the person they are to "greet" (however, some dogs may do this because they want a butt scratch!)
- Pawing at you or just lifting a paw
- Sniffing the ground
- Lip licking or flicking their tongue
- Moving closer to you/leaning on you/hugging (acting insecure)
- Sitting down and refusing to engage
- Cowering (body tucked up)
- Shake off (a sudden shake like after a bath, this is a way of relieving stress)
- Trembling

- Staring at you expectantly
- Refusing a command, such as a trick they would normally happily do.
Trick or command refusal can be caused by they don't really know it as well as you think, there are too many distractions, sickness or pain, stress or insecurity in that environment
- Tail wags say many things, in stress it is generally only the tip and tucked down between legs, or quickly wagging down low
- Licking your face together with ears back or down and sometimes out (like wings) with or without whale eye can be an appeasement gesture (they are saying "get me out of here")
- Whale eye (whites of the eye showing)
- Ears back or down and generally out to sides (but not always!)
- Forehead creased, eyebrows raised and looks worried
- Slow moving or quick darts away (trying to avoid the situation)
- Holding head down (trying not to be noticed)
- Scratching
- Chewing
- Cannot settle, sits and stands and shifts around, pacing
- Refuses to go toward the "work" and tries to go in another direction
- Turns their head away when putting on their vest (for dogs who have learned the association between the vest and work, these dogs may need a vacation or retirement)
- Inappropriate elimination (this dog is most likely not suitable for therapy work anymore)

When you see any of these signals, especially if you see multiple ones at the same time, it is important to redirect your dog. The best solution is give them a break. Maybe call it quits for the day. If you cannot for some reason then take them outside for a short walk or a roll in the grass. Do a "sniff walk" where they get to lead you and sniff to their heart's content. Maybe have the dog do some tricks and give them their favorite reward for a job well done (food or a favorite toy, maybe even a short game of tug). Keep in mind however, that at some point if your dog is showing stress signals often while doing therapy work, it may be time to retire them. The following link is to a video where a dog has started showing stress signals. The video has clips that were taken over a span of a couple years, but she has started showing these signals more often and to a greater degree, so she is now retired. Even humans want to be able to retire from work at some point, why would our dogs be any different? Please see video for examples of stress signals: <https://youtu.be/CpJVjMRCCoo>

While we want to do the Lord's work and bring joy to those who are sick or hurting or in prison (Matthew 25:36) we also need to take good care of our dogs (Proverbs 12:10) so they can continue to be partners with us (Mark 6:7) doing the Lord's work of spreading love and joy and the hope of the Gospel message.