



Stress-Induced Behavior Is Not Always Obvious



The veterinary practice can be a scary place where less than desirable activities, from blood draws to shots to temperature taking, inevitably occur. Patients quickly realize that a practice visit is unlikely to be fun, and their fight, flight, or freeze response kicks in.

Fear can be recognized easily in dogs that hide, scream, or snap, but others may not demonstrate fear and anxiety as colorfully. These quieter vocalizers can be challenging because they warrant special care and handling. Anxiety that is not recognized and managed properly can result in bites, stress-induced ailments, and an overall traumatic experience that threatens future visits.

Read the Signs

Animals communicate important messages through body language, but humans often fail to understand. Most veterinary team members recognize an overtly fearful dog that is growling and hiding with its tail tucked and lip lifted, but they may not pick up on the following subtle behavior signs, which should be interpreted in

conjunction with other signals in the context of the situation:

- **Posture.** A stressed dog often crouches low to the ground with its ears back and tail tucked between the legs (**Figure 1**).
- **Activity.** Increased motor activity (eg, pacing, circling) can indicate stress. Freezing or moving slowly may indicate anxiety.
- **Eyes.** Dilated pupils, darting glances, avoiding eye contact, and showing the whites of the eyes, typically described as “whale eye,” can be signs of fear.
- **Mouth.** Lip licking and yawning are cues dogs use to communicate that they are uncomfortable (**Figure 2**). Refusing treats that the dog would normally accept is another sign.¹
- **Movements.** Displacement behaviors or behaviors performed out of context (eg, sudden grooming, scratching, sniffing, body shaking, paw lifting) often indicate stress (**Figure 3**).
- **Panting.** Open-mouth breathing with an increased respiratory rate can indicate stress or overheating. Be aware that panting can occur in a relaxed state and should be interpreted in the context of the situation.

Reduce the Stress

Team members who identify these subtle signs should try to minimize patient anxiety. Because dogs can readily interpret human body postures, actions, and words,² use the following tips for stress reduction before and during a practice visit:

- **Ask pertinent questions.** Clients know their pet best, so ask about the patient’s likes and dislikes. Specifically, determine the patient’s attitude toward potential stressors (eg, strangers, other dogs) so that the team knows to avoid them.



Figure 1. A fearful dog crouches low with tail tucked, ears back, and pupils dilated. The dog retreated to a corner when the veterinarian entered the examination room.



Figure 2. Lip licking is a common displacement behavior exhibited by anxious dogs.



Figure 3. Paw lifting is another common displacement behavior.



Figure 4. A dog offered positive reinforcement (eg, peanut butter on a pretzel stick) eats with his ears up rather than pinned back.

Photos courtesy of Zenithson Ng, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, College of Veterinary Medicine

• **Provide positive reinforcement.**

Events that elicit fear likely will cause more negative responses in the absence of positive reinforcement³; therefore, continuously reward an anxious patient throughout the visit (**Figure 4**). Instruct the client not to feed the patient before the appointment so treats are more likely to be accepted. Check whether the patient has any food allergies, or have the client bring favorite treats. Ask clients with patients that are not food-motivated to bring favorite toys for rewards before, during, and after the visit.

- **Communicate nonverbally.** Use nonthreatening body language by sitting down, giving the patient space, and letting the patient approach. Avoid hovering over or staring directly at the patient.

Be sure to speak softly in an anxious animal's presence.

- **Use pheromones.** Although evidence is still lacking, noninvasive pheromone use can reduce anxiety in some patients.⁴
- **Provide soothing sounds.** The sounds of barking dogs and vocalizing cats are impossible to eliminate in the practice, but they can be dampened with classical music.¹ Also, be sure to speak softly in an anxious animal's presence.

- **Beware of clients who help—and hinder.** Some dogs appear more anxious without their owner, whereas others appear more anxious with their owner, especially someone who clearly shows his or her own stress and anxiety. Try working with the patient with and without the client present to determine which is less stressful.

Practice visits can be positive experiences or scar a patient for life, especially when the negative experience is ingrained during adolescence.⁵ The goal should be to make every visit as stress-free as possible to bond both patient and client to the practice and ensure they return regularly.

Stress-reduction methods should be explained to clients so they learn the correct ways to interact with fearful dogs. The key to success is knowing the more subtle signs of stress and educating clients to recognize and mitigate stress in everyday situations.

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