

Signs of *anxiety* and **fear**

From Dr. Marty Becker

Take note of these signs to save your pet from stress.

Take a look at the long list below, and you may not be surprised that many signs of anxiety and fear in dogs or cats are commonly overlooked. Repeated episodes of fear can result in your pet experiencing

unnecessary stress and, thus, a reduced quality of life. If you notice any of these signs frequently, schedule a visit with your veterinarian to help determine the cause, and learn how to lessen and eventually prevent future episodes.

Avoiding eye contact

Barking

Biting

Blinking, squinting

Clinging to owner

Cowering

Defecation

Dilated pupils

Dribbling urine/
submissive urination

Ears lowered or flattened

Freezing or walking slowly

Furrowed brows

Growling

Hardened eyes
(direct stare with pupils dilated)

Hiding

Hissing

Hypersalivation

Hypervigilance

Jumping and startle easy at
slight changes—hyperalert state

Licking lips

Lifting one paw

Lip curling

Mouth closed tightly
or pulled back

Mouth pursed forward

Mouthing

Nails extended

Nipping

Pacing

Panting

Piloerection (raised hair)

Rigid forward stance

Running off

Screaming

Self-grooming
(scratching, licking self)

“Shaking off”

Shedding

Slow-motion moving

Snapping

Sniffing/appearing
distracted

Staring

“Sweaty” paws

Tail tucked

Taking treats harder than usual,
being pickier with treats, or not
taking treats at all even if hungry

Trembling

Turning away (C-shape)

Turning head

Whining

Whiskers erected

Wide-eyed/sclera showing

Will not settle down and rest, or
will for a moment but back up
and moving again

Won't accept treats

Yawning



Stress triggers for dogs

Are you contributing to your dog's anxiety and behavior issues? It's possible if you do any of the following:

1. You punish your dog. Dogs are creatures of opportunity, so avoid opportunities for trouble. If you leave trash or your “stuff” where the dog can get it, it will explore the wonderful-smelling tidbits and assume they're his or hers. If you value your “stuff,” keep it picked up and put away.

2. You keep telling your dog “no.” When you say “no” and your dog stops the behavior, but then repeats it in a short period of time, the “no” was simply an interrupter. Skeptical? Try saying “pickle” instead of “no,” and the same pattern of stopping then repeating the behavior is likely to return. Instead, show your dog what you want it to do.

3. You assume your dog “knows” English. Animals communicate using body language and are very good at figuring us out. Unless you have specifically taught your dog to “drop it,” “leave it,” “get it,” and “come,” just to name a few, then your dog may not actually “know” these terms. Therefore, using them will result in stress as your dog attempts to guess the right answer.

4. You say to your dog, “It's OK.” While this may comfort some pets, generally, owners only say this when something bad is happening or is about to happen. It becomes a cue to be afraid or vigilant. Instead, teach your dog some coping skills for various anxiety-inducing situations.

teach them—without punishment—that a loose leash is a wonderful thing. (*For more information on Nos. 4 and 5, check out Decoding Your Dog: The Ultimate Experts Explain Common Dog Behaviors and Reveal How to Prevent or Change Unwanted Ones, from the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists.*)

6. You hug or kiss your dog. Do you like when someone holds onto you so you can't move away? How about being hugged and kissed by strangers? Dogs in general do not like to be hugged and kissed—especially by strangers. Restraining a dog so it can't get away puts you on its “not-to-be-trusted” list.

7. You stare at your dog. Direct prolonged eye contact with dogs is very confrontational. In canine body language, it suggests you would like to interact—and not necessarily in a good way.

8. You point or shake your finger at your dog. Typically, when you're doing this, you're also leaning over your dog—and this too makes your dog uncomfortable. How do you know? The “guilty look” isn't because it's actually guilty, but rather it's uncomfortable with the current interaction.

9. You command your pet to “get down” when it's jumping. What word do you use when you want your dog to get into the position where its belly is touching the floor? If it's “down,” then when your pet is jumping up, do you expect it to have its belly on the floor when you say “down”—or just on all four paws? Use a different term such as “off,” or “four on floor” and teach the dog what the word means. The name of the cue is irrelevant. You could use the word “purple,” as long as you show the dog the action that goes along with it. (*See No. 3.*)

10. You don't “let sleeping dogs lie.” Dogs don't like to be bothered while sleeping any more than we do.

Information provided by Valarie V. Tynes, DVM, DACVB, Premier Veterinary Behavior Consulting, Sweetwater, Texas, and Colleen Koch, DVM, Lincoln Land Animal Clinic, Jacksonville, Ill.



5. You pull on the leash. You may think your dog is pulling you and that your dog thinks the only way it can go forward is to lug the slow lazy human forward. But pulling on the leash increases everyone's frustration and stress. We owe it to our dogs to

Stress triggers for cats

Are you contributing to your cat's anxiety and behavior issues? It's possible if you do any of the following:

1. You punish your cat. Swatting and hitting your cat only teaches it to fear your approach. Telling your cat “no” only interrupts the behavior. Instead, show your cat what you want it to do, and reward it for appropriate behaviors. Cats are very curious and agile—so give yours places to go and things to do, and keep potentially dangerous items picked up and put away.

2. You assume your cat “knows” English. Animals communicate using body language and are very good at figuring us out. Most people don't bother teaching their cats to sit, much less any other cue—but it's surprisingly easy to train them to do behaviors on cue. Just don't assume your cat understands what you're saying without teaching it what you want it to do first.

3. You grab your cat's head to tousle its hair. Nobody likes to have their head grabbed and rubbed—cats are no different! Most cats prefer a few long strokes from head to tail; others prefer a small amount of gentle scratching around the chin or ears. Many cats get irritated by an extended period of repetitive stroking.

4. You hug or kiss your cat. Cats like to be able to move and escape situations. When we hold them tightly, they may become stressed, anticipating that something bad is going to happen.

5. You don't clean your cat's litter box. Nobody likes to use a dirty toilet—including your cat. Imagine not flushing your own toilet for three or four days! Ideally, the litter box should be scooped every time you notice waste. Otherwise, they should be scooped at least once daily. Most need to be completely emptied and cleaned

every one to two weeks.

Regular scooping also allows you to identify early signs of illness such as diarrhea, constipation, or excessive or lack of urination.

6. Your cat's litter box is in an inconvenient location. The spot you've chosen for the litter box might work best for you, but a cat that has to negotiate humans of all ages, other pets, stairs, or loud appliances might feel like the journey is a suicide mission every time it needs to eliminate.

7. You tempt your cat to play by wiggling your fingers or toes, then get angry when it bites or scratches you. Cats naturally grab “prey” using their teeth and claws. Offer your cat the appropriate chew toys so it knows that hands are for loving—not biting!

8. You leave your cat home alone with a jumbo-sized portion of food and one litter box while you go on vacation for a long weekend. Especially for cats that eat quickly, this can be stressful because they'll have no food left by the end of the weekend. Cats can become sick if they don't eat every day. Timed feeders can be helpful in this situation. A self-cleaning litter box may also be a reasonable option, but don't rely on it—it's important that you pay attention to the frequency and quality of your pet's eliminations so you can identify any changes that could indicate stress-induced health problems such as cystitis, constipation, and diarrhea.

9. You use strong-smelling cleansers, deodorizers, and products containing alcohol. Cats' noses are sensitive, and these scents can be offensive to them. Be careful about the use of these products in your home or on your person. Some cats may even find the smell of hair spray, perfume, or cologne unpleasant.

10. You add new cats to your home without an introduction period. When an unrelated cat appears and tries to join a related group, it's in the cats' nature to attack and force the outsider to leave. Without a proper period of controlled, gradual introduction, the chance of aggression between cats and stress increases.

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The facts about growling

True or false: If a dog growls aggressively, you should show him who's boss and punish him.

False. Punishing a dog for showing aggression, including growling, can have many negative effects on your dog—and your relationship with your pet.

It can be frustrating and embarrassing when your dog growls, whether he's reacting to a visitor at your house or a passerby on the street. Your gut reaction might be to jerk on the dog's collar or manhandle him into a controlled position. Here's why that's a bad idea.

Why you shouldn't punish

Force and fear-based tactics are extremely dangerous both for you and your dog, because it can worsen your dog's behavioral problems and increase aggression and fear-based behavior. While punishment may temporarily inhibit the aggressive response, stifling a growl, over time punishment often intensifies a dog's reaction and escalates his aggression or anxiety. Punishment also damages your relationship of trust with your dog, as your interactions become less predictable. When you use force-based techniques, you increase the risk your dog will show aggression—and bite.

Signs of your pet's emotional state

Many forms of aggression are rooted in fear. When you punish your dog for aggressive displays, the punishment doesn't change the dog's emotional state to a positive one. It simply suppresses your dog's way of releasing his anxiety. Punishment temporarily masks the symptoms of the underlying issue, such as fear of the stimulus that causes his barking and growling. The symptoms may temporarily fade, but the emotion—and the problem—remain, even if it's dormant for a period. In many cases, the aggression intensifies with punishment. Punishment may heighten your dog's negative association and tension because your dog anticipates you may be upset and may punish the growling.

Punishment hinders your dog's ability to communicate how he's feeling and decreases his warning signals before

a bite. Dogs that have been punished for growling or other aggressive warning signals may progress faster into a bite, and they may display fewer warning signs.

Growling—the bark before the bite?

In many cases, a dog that seemingly “bites out of nowhere” has a history of having been punished for aggressive warnings, like growling. Even the dogs said to bite without warning still show subtle signs before escalating, such as a freeze or the whites of their eyes showing. But the signs are often less noticeable and harder to read. Though dogs speak in many ways through body language and other vocalizations, a growl is one way dogs communicate the loudest about their discomfort.

When a dog communicates how he feels, such as growling at another person or dog, this is like the check engine light in a car that communicates all isn't right. It's much better for you—and for your dog—when you respect a growl as a warning and address the action humanely later.

An important point: When the dog growls, this is rarely the time to “fix” the dog and resolve the situation. First, there's a high risk for a bite from the dog's overaroused emotional state. Second, your dog may not be prepared to learn a better response or association with the situation in the moment. Instead, try pausing to either stop the aversive scenario or remove the dog if needed. Then you can devise a plan to address your dog's response in a helpful manner. In some cases, you can interrupt the negative behavior by redirecting the dog to do another behavior, like going to their bed, that you can reward.

Your dog may also benefit from a training plan to help become more comfortable with the situation, such as training him to tolerate or even enjoy handling from less familiar people. Your veterinarian may recommend a veterinary behaviorist or work with a positive reinforcement trainer to help.

Growling and other aggressive displays are merely a symptom of a deeper underlying issue, such as fear. By addressing the issue in full and changing a dog's emotion of fear into happy anticipation in the same scenario, the growl and other aggressive displays fade on their own as you change your dog's emotional state.



The canine LADDER of AGGRESSION

Dogs communicate their discomfort with a situation and a desire to end an interaction by using visual cues. These are depicted on this ladder of aggression. Recognizing the lower-rung gestures is important so a perceived stress or threat to a dog can be removed sooner.

