

Stress and Your Dog - Minimizing the Effects

Dogs with Wings Assistance Dog Society | February 2014

Experts tell us that dogs are sensitive creatures that pick up on signals both spoken and unspoken in the people around them. Whenever a new stress comes into your household, you can bet that your dog is feeling it as much as you do. However, dogs may show their signs of stress differently than humans. Here are some situations that cause stress in dogs and how you can minimize the tension in the home.

Sickness, Emotion, or Family Events

When a family member is ill or going through hard times, the dog will notice change in family tempo and will pick up on any sadness or worry that occurs in these situations. Again, exercise is the best way to work off his tensions. If possible, allow him to spend time with the relevant family members so that he knows he has not been excluded from this important time in his family group. Having other family members engage in playtime with him will help to allay his fears about changes going on in the household. Imagine yourself being excluded from these family times.

Moving

Moving creates stresses of its own with a complete upheaval of the home environment and a variety of new situations. Your dog will feel the move particularly strongly because your dog depends on the smells in his environment to tell him so much. When the environment changes he has fewer signals to rely on, which can leave him feeling disoriented and unhappy. He may express his feelings with a poor appetite, a short temper or a general air of restlessness.

Make finding a comfortable place for his bed, toys, feeding bowl and other familiar object one of the first actions you take in your new location. Knowing he can rely on these essential items can help to make him feel more at home. Also, spend time acquainting him with the smells, sights and sounds of the neighborhood. This time will help him find his olfactory “home base” so that he can relax and make himself more comfortable in the new setting.

New Animal or New Person Stress

A new animal or person in the household can throw things into turmoil. When a new cat is introduced to a dog, you may have to take special care to separate the two behind a door or gate and gradually accustom the two to living together. For small mammals like hamsters or guinea pigs, you may never be able to have them meet face to face. For some dogs, the presence of a small animal brings out their hunting/killing instincts. Be aware of this engrained instinct to avoid tragedy.

When new people enter the family picture, especially a baby, everything seems to change. Daily rhythms change and different people may visit. Your dog notices all these changes and may feel some of the stress of these changes. He may have accidents in the house, bark excessively at passers by or find a place to hide – especially if a baby is crying. Finding ways to show your dog he is not displaced and that his welfare is still important to you can help to reduce his tension. For new babies, invite him to sit with you during 2 am feeding times to show he is still part of the family group. Make sure his feeding times are on time and take him for an additional walk during the day. Even if you have to call a dog-walker or have neighbor help with walking, it will help him to run off the stress of his nervous energy.

Keep in mind that stress can often be felt, so when there is stress in the air, odds are it is affecting your dog as well. Help you both by staying in touch with your dog and keeping him at your side as a loyal dog owner. He will appreciate it, and so will you.

About Dogs with Wings:

Dogs with Wings is a leader in the international community of assistance dog training schools. The organization exists to serve people with disabilities. They work collaboratively, and in partnership with other organizations that provide assistance dogs to people with disabilities.

Dogs with Wings Assistance Dog Society | 780.944.8011 | Edmonton, Alberta

Dogs with Wings Assistance Dog Society | 587.284.3647 | Calgary, Alberta

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