

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.

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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