

Decoding a fearful dog's body language

By Julia Lamont

When I accepted my first job working with animals, as an assistant in a veterinary office, I considered myself dog-savvy. Having owned several dogs in my lifetime, I felt I was up to the task of handling the many dogs that would walk through the doors of the clinic. But it wasn't long before I realized there's a big difference between interacting with my own family's dog and a dog that not only didn't know me but also wasn't so keen on being at a veterinary clinic.

Luckily, my co-workers gave me a crash course in dog body language and how to spot the signs that a dog was feeling scared, stressed or anxious. While some signs were obvious, many were much more subtle.

Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for people to misinterpret these lesser-known cues — for example, mistaking stillness for relaxation, or lip-licking for excitement. Yet, these signals may be the only signs that a dog is feeling fearful, so they're crucial to recognize. Failure to read a scared dog's body language is one of the surest paths to a dog bite.

Here are a few things to look for:

What is their mouth doing? Aside from obvious signs like barking, growling, and lip curling, look for more subtle cues. A dog that is tense and stressed will often lick their lips and even yawn repeatedly. That's right, it's not boredom — it's anxiety. They might also pant and drool excessively.

What are their eyes doing? A scared dog may have dilated pupils, and will often avoid eye contact altogether, averting or ducking their head. They may also look at you with what's known as a "whale eye," peering at you sideways and showing the whites of their eyes. People often misinterpret a lack of eye contact as a signal to try even harder to gain a dog's attention, leaving the dog even more overstimulated.

What is their body doing? While most people can recognize raised hackles as a sure sign of fear or anxiety, not all dogs will be so animated. A dog may be unusually still, which is sometimes confused for a calm demeanor. Others may be especially restless and will pace or sniff excessively, which is sometimes confused for excess energy or a need for attention.

If you've established that a dog is feeling scared, nervous, or stressed, there are some important steps you can take in your interactions to help put them at ease.

What to do

- **Avoid eye contact.** While looking directly into a dog's eyes may seem like a friendly gesture to us as humans, it can seem adversarial to a particularly nervous dog. And while the side-eye may be rude when meeting new people, it's a safe, benign approach when meeting new dogs.
- **Toss treats.** Treats are often the way to a food-motivated dog's heart. Tossing the treats gently at an angle between you and the dog (not directly at the dog) rather than offering them on an extended hand is a good way to help a dog relax.
- **Approach slowly and sideways.** While it's better to allow a dog to approach you first, if you must approach, keeping your side toward a dog is non-threatening, and a slower pace ensures you won't startle them.

What not to do

- **Reach your hand towards the dog's face or lean over their head.** Instead, let the dog approach you in their own time to give you a sniff. If they become comfortable after approaching you on their own terms, you can reach out slowly to stroke the dog on the back.
- **Make a lot of noise.** Many people instinctively resort to a lot of coaxing and chatter in the hope that they'll appear friendly. But too much talk is more likely to overwhelm a dog than cajole them into a new friendship.
- **Corner them.** When a dog feels trapped, they may panic, so always make sure they have a potential "out" to move away from you if they're feeling overwhelmed.

Of course, if a dog is showing signs of fear and stress and your best efforts aren't helping them to relax, it's important to put your safety first. Get assistance from a professional, or the dog's guardian, rather than risk a bite.

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