

CANINE STRESS

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Many of the incidents to which you and your canine partner will be called to work will be **stressful situations**. The elements of danger, urgency, injuries, fatalities, unknowns are all stress producers, for the human and the canine member of the team. As humans, it is our obligation to our canine partner that we not get so caught up in our own thoughts that we fail to consider and observe their reactions.

Canines are a species with sophisticated and subtle communication skills. They exchange information with each other and with us through body language. Some of it is obvious to us as handlers, but much of it frequently goes unnoticed to the untrained eye. If a handler isn't paying close attention to these subtleties, they can actually believe the dog is working when it is in fact just going through some of the motions.

These loyal canine partners of ours are so willing to work with us that we easily fall into the trap of thinking of them as tools. They can be, in fact, valuable tools, but are not machines. They are living individuals and experience emotions similar to many of ours. Dogs can feel joy, fear, anxiety, excitement, agitation, jealousy etc. **and stress**. It is stress that we need to deal with in these particular incidents.

Recognizing Stress

Can you easily recognize when your dog is experiencing stress? Do you consciously watch for it? There are many signals through which you may spot this condition before it becomes out of hand or critical to performance. Dogs and their body language form of communication have many signals or gestures that tell us how they are doing. As each dog is an individual, it will be your job as handler or observer to look at the big picture and determine what the dog is telling you. Common things that can indicate stress are:

Body posture

Body tense, stiff
Body droopy, tired appearance
Body lowered, not cowering but slinkier than usual
Stretching
Skin twitching
Change in pace
Sit down
Tail wag different from normal

Vocalizing

Whining
Barking

Eyes

Dilated pupils
Glazed look
Squinting
Shifty eyes
Whale eye, white showing
Blinking
Red pigment around eyes (also inner ears)
Avoids eye contact (turns head away)
Looks to handler frequently for directions

Mouth

Panting, too wide or too narrow
Licking lips or nose
Yawning
Jaw clomping
Drooling
Velvet tongue

Face

Furrowed brow
Mouth corners back
Ears back or uneven
Veins prominent under eyes

Other

Stop to chew on self, scratch
Just sits or lays down
Comes to you in an attention getting manner
Paws sweating

Tail held lower than normal
Sniffing
Digging
Circling, returning to you in arc path
Out of context behaviors

Many of these signals are very subtle, and can be harder to observe on some of the longer haired breeds, but not impossible. If you spend some time watching your dog and looking for any of these occurrences and think about what was happening when you saw them, you will become more adept at recognizing them when it's very important. Obviously, some of the above examples would also indicate there might be a problem with hazardous contaminants (drooling, red pigment around eyes, etc.). You need to use some judgement in this respect.

Since canines communicate through body language, they have long since figured out what every little gesture you use really means. If you are intense, uncomfortable, tired, frustrated worried, blah blah blah, **or stressed**, they will be totally aware of it. As your partner, they will react to that as well as to the environment. You may find them trying to calm you down with calming signals; approaching you in an arc, turning their head away, averting eye contact, licking lips and nose, turning their back and sitting down, or simply jumping up on you and offering a snuggle. Hard as we try, it is next to impossible to fool them about our feelings.

What to do

So, I observe my dog feeling the stress, what can I do? This is going to depend on the circumstances of the environment, but here are some suggestions:

Take a break

this may be complicated if you have to go through decon to leave the area, but you can also stop and break where you are. However, a total scene change is more effective.

Use calming signals

stretch (in the form of a doggy play bow lightens up to atmosphere), yawn, blink your eyes, look away rather than direct eye contact with the dog, and take a deep breath and sigh

Relax yourself

free your mind of all the business that's running through and think of something pleasant, let your muscles go into relax mode, but maintain a confident posture

Reassure the dog

vocalize to the dog that they are great and all is well etc. Carry on a conversation in a light hearted, soft and reassuring manner - the voice can be very calming - just don't overdue it, they will figure that out in a hurry.

Training for stress

It can be very valuable to do some training with stress control in mind. This will help you and the dog learn to cope together and prevent you from exceeding either of your thresholds for stress too quickly.

Put a calming word into your training vocabulary. Use it frequently when everything is relaxed and safe. Use it at home, out and about, during trainings, until the dog realizes that it is the cue that everything is fine. This becomes a great tool when you are pushed to work a stressful area, as you can reassure the dog and yourself because it has become conditioned for both of you.

Remember, stress is cumulative. You will not be effective if enough is amassed and you don't break and leave the area for rest and to regroup. The saying "I can feel it in the air" is very appropriate when working a dangerous and hectic site. Everyone's stress level adds to another's, so be aware that it is critical that you break when either you or the canine is above your threshold. Often when you arrive on a site, the stress level is already at the stage that you can 'feel' it. Dogs feel it too!!