

How's Your Dog Really Feeling?

Just because your dog can't say "I'm sad" or "I'm anxious," doesn't mean he's not experiencing emotional turmoil. Here's how to help your furry friend out

BY HOLLY PEVZNER



WE ALL KNOW DOGS can do wonders for our mental health. Service dogs can help alleviate

symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Therapy pups have been shown to reduce stress in students, healthcare workers and others. Even your average house dog can considerably quell anxiety and sadness, all while improving happiness, according to a 2019 study in the journal *Animals*. And a more recent report found that 70% of folks credit their dog for helping them cope with loneliness and depression brought on by the pandemic. So, yeah, dogs are the best. But they're not immune to their own mental health woes.

"Just like humans, dogs can most certainly suffer from mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression," says Stephanie Borns-Weil, DVM, DACVB, a veterinary behaviorist and clinical assistant professor at Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in North Grafton, Mass. "But unlike humans, dogs can't describe to us what they're feeling and thinking." Instead, they do things like incessantly chase their tails, lunge at the neighbor, refuse

walks, or cower under the sofa. And while we often see these types of habits as silly little quirks or behavior problems, the reality is that "most of these actions are rooted in some underlying psychological issue," says veterinary behaviorist Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, DACVB, president of the Center for Canine Behavior Studies in Salisbury, Conn. The good news? The signs are there and help is in reach. We just need to know what we're looking for.

When Depression Strikes

"Sadly, depression in dogs is more common than most people think," says Borns-Weil. Much like their owners, dogs can become blue following a variety of life changes, such as the loss of a loved one or a fur buddy, a move, or any kind of a disruption in routine. Things like chronic stress and anxiety and a lack of predictability can spur depression, too. So can complete and utter boredom, which can be especially true for high-energy, driven breeds who thrive on physical or mental stimulation, such as herding dogs, boxers, Golden Retrievers, Dobermans and Great Danes, notes the American Kennel Club (AKC). "With Covid

lockdowns, many of us learned firsthand how much our mental health suffered from not going to work, attending exercise classes, going to services, meeting with friends and doing other human things," says Borns-Weil. "It's the same for dogs. A lack of opportunities to do doggie things can easily cause or contribute to depression."

You don't have to be an expert to spot signs of depression in your dog. You simply need to tune into what's normal for your pups, so you can see when abnormal behavior arises. Has your terrier's appetite waned? Is your doodle-mix less interested in fetch or heading to the park? Is your pug sleepier than usual? Has your chocolate lab started following you around the house? All of these may be signs of depression. "If you see these or really any behavior changes in your dog, visit the vet," says Borns-Weil, noting that pain and discomfort are very common causes of depression, making a vet visit imperative.

If there is a physical explanation for your pup's mood, proper treatment steps will be taken. "And if pain is a possibility, but no clear cause is apparent upon a physical exam or testing, your vet may still





Many dogs chase their tails, but for some the behavior is a sign of the canine version of OCD. If your dog circles for hours on end or seems obsessive, get in touch with your vet.

suggest a trial course of analgesics, or painkillers,” says Daniel S. Mills, PhD, professor of veterinary behavioral medicine at the University of Lincoln, in the U.K. “Of course, you have to assess the clinical picture first, but I’d say that about 80% of the behavior issues I see in my own practice, including depression, are in some way related to pain.” No illness or injury? Then your vet may suggest you make some changes at home.

“If the problem is due to something like lack of social engagement or insufficient stimulation or exercise, then fixing those problems will help the dog get his or

her groove back,” says Borns-Weil. For instance, a report in the journal *PLOS One* notes that exercise increases production of the feel-good hormone serotonin in animals, thus functioning as a doggie antidepressant. That said, “there are many dogs who live with people who really do provide optimal care for their dogs who are still depressed,” says Borns-Weil. “Dogs, like people, can exhibit depressive behavior for a variety of reasons, like genetics or early life trauma where, say, the dog was mistreated, didn’t get their needs met as a young puppy, or trained by people who used pain, threat or fear.” For those

pups, treating underlying anxiety or post-traumatic stress with vet-led behavior modification and, in some cases, psychoactive medication, may be best, says Borns-Weil.

When Tail-Chasing Becomes Extreme

German shepherds and terriers are prone to chasing their tails and spinning. Herding breeds, like Border collies, are more apt to go after light and shadows. Meanwhile, “Dobermans tend to grab on to their upper thigh with their mouth, called flank sucking. And several other large breed dogs tend to focus on licking their limbs,” says

Dodman. All of these dog activities are totally normal. That is, “if they’re done in moderation or for a specific purpose,” says Amanda Williams, DVM, chief veterinarian and medical director at Furry Friends Adoption, Clinic & Ranch in Jupiter, Fla. But when these behaviors become excessive and difficult to stop, then your dog may have canine compulsive disorder (CCD), the dog version of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Other signs of CCD include pacing, freezing and staring, endlessly sucking on a toy or drinking water, snapping at invisible items, nonstop barking and various forms of self-mutilation. “This is when a dog licks or bites themselves to an extreme, causing injury,” says Williams. “Like if your dog licks the same spot repeatedly, causing skin issues and bald patches, or chases and bites his tail to the point that it’s damaged and may need to be amputated.” Self-mutilation is actually the most common CCD behavior in dogs, according to a 2020 study in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

The same report found that overall 16% of dogs exhibit CCD behaviors, with German shepherds, mixed breed dogs and Staffordshire bull terriers impacted the most. “To some extent, the compulsive behaviors in these dogs are based on genetics and on the function for which the breed was developed,” says Dodman. For instance, the AKC notes that when working dogs—like the light-chasing Border collie—find themselves job-free, compulsive behaviors might surface. Furthermore, it seems that dogs with CCD (like humans with OCD) may have a hiccup in their serotonin transmission, which impacts the ability of brain and nervous system cells to

communicate with each other. Plus, research in the journal *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology & Biological Psychiatry* found that the flank-sucking Doberman pinschers with CCD display similar underlying structural brain abnormalities as people who have OCD.

Similarly to doggie depression, compulsive behaviors in dogs can sometimes be due to an underlying medical condition. In fact, self-mutilation is often spurred by allergies, fleas or another skin issue. Other times, CCD is an extreme reaction to a lack of physical or mental stimulation, high anxiety or frustration. No matter what might be the cause, CCD can be difficult to diagnose. Not only can dogs not tell us what they’re obsessing about, but “many dog owners simply don’t know what’s normal and what’s abnormal, so it’s difficult to recognize when they’re behaving in an obsessive manner,” says Borns-Weil. If you suspect CCD may be in play, try to catch your dog’s obsessive behavior on video to help the vet diagnose the issue. (Also, keep a record of when and how often the behaviors occur, and whether a specific situation seems to domino the reaction.)

“Oftentimes, environmental treatment of OCD-like behaviors can be helpful,” says Dodman. “That means providing the dog an enriched environment that caters to their biological needs. For example, a light-chasing Border collie may stop the behavior entirely if regularly taken to sheep herding classes.” For others, increasing daily exercise can be very helpful. “If these types of treatments don’t work, medication is another possible route,” says Dodman. “In that context, human anti-obsessional drugs like Prozac or drugs that

limit the activity of the neurotransmitter glutamate, like Namenda, are helpful.”

Could It Be Anxiety?

“Anxiety in dogs is just as common as anxiety in people,” says Ragen T.S. McGowan, PhD, pet behavior research scientist for Purina in St. Joseph, Mo., who notes that all dogs can experience anxiety from time to time. In fact, anxiety-related problems occur in 44% of dogs, according to a 2019 report in the journal *Canine Research*, and a 2018 Purina survey eked that number up, with 62% of dog owners saying that their dog demonstrated at least one anxious behavior. (Separation anxiety, PTSD, fear of new situations, thunderstorm or loud-noise stress, and more all fall into the anxiety bucket.)

According to Dodman, herding dogs tend to show more fearful or anxious behaviors than other breeds, but doggie anxiety can affect all pups. And despite what you may have heard, small dogs are not more anxious than their larger counterparts. “It’s just that they’re in public more often than big dogs, so their anxious behavior is more visible,” says McGowan. Like humans, dogs have different personalities and temperaments that influence the way they react to things that go on in their day-to-day life. “But one of the most powerful instigators of anxiety is experiencing an adverse event or circumstances during the sensitive period of learning, which is arguably the first six months of life,” says Dodman. (Spending long hours alone in a crate or being re-homed multiple times are examples of early adversity.) As such, some puppies will display anxious temperaments early on, “while others develop anxious behavior later due to new or

disruptive changes to their environment or routine,” says McGowan. For instance, as much as our dogs loved the extra attention they received when so many of us were working from home during the pandemic, it very much disrupted their routine. “This exacerbated existing anxiety in some dogs and caused it in others,” says McGowan, whose own dogs took their role as family protectors a bit too seriously during quarantine, becoming overly anxious and barking at the window when the slightest thing happened outside.

Excessive barking is far from the sole symptom of anxiety. “You may notice your dog’s ears pressed flat against their head or worried facial expressions that could be an averted gaze; pupils widely dilated; or whale eye, when the whites of the dog’s eyes appear in a half-moon shape at the inner or outer side of the eye,” says Dodman. Other clues include drooling, panting, potty accidents, restlessness, destructive behavior and aggression. The previously mentioned study in *Scientific Reports* found that anxious and fearful dogs were 3.2 times more aggressive than nonfearful dogs. And, according to Dodman, “aggression is often a result of unpleasant earlier experiences, including PTSD.”

“The very best way to treat your dog’s anxiety is to visit the veterinarian,” says Dodman, who advises recording a video of your dog’s behavior for your vet. They’ll be able to help you zero in on the type of anxiety your pupper is dealing with and, hopefully, uncover causes and triggers in order to land on the perfect treatment option. After all, recovery plans for, say, the 19% of dogs that have anxiety

because of crowds will not be the same as for the 31% of dogs who are dealing with anxiety related to noise and thunderstorms. And while sometimes-anxious pups may not require intervention, know that “animals who are in a chronic vigilant state have higher levels of circulating hormones such as cortisol,” says McGowan. These kinds of chronic, unchecked and excessive levels of anxiety can spur a full-blown anxiety disorder in your pup, according to the AKC. And research in the journal *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* has shown that anxiety disorders can have detrimental effects on the health and lifespan of your dog.

What Looks Like Separation Anxiety May Be Something Else

About 17% of dogs experience separation anxiety, notes a 2019 report in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*. With separation anxiety, it appears as though your dog is wound up about being left alone, as manifested in such unpleasant behaviors as potty accidents, destruction and endless barking. But sometimes what looks like separation anxiety really isn’t. A 2020 report in the journal *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* notes that various forms of frustration, like boredom, wanting to get to something out of reach or reacting to outside noises, are likely the heart of the issue. “Try setting up a doggie cam to see if this can help you discern the cause,” says McGowan. And next time you leave your pup home, “provide him with a lot of things to occupy his time, like treat-stuffed toys, cognitive puzzles or dog toys designed to pull apart, which can help with boredom,” says McGowan. These fun things also act as what’s dubbed

counterconditioning, which means you’re helping your dog develop a positive association with your leaving. Each time you head for work, pups get a yummy treat or a fun puzzle to play with.

What to Do About Noise Anxiety

While noise sensitivity is most common in Lagotto Romagnolos (a.k.a. Italian water dogs), Wheaten terriers and mixed breeds, a bright boom of fireworks or a loud clap of thunder causes problems for about one third of all dogs, according to research. Big noises can be rough on a dog’s acute sense of hearing and the unpredictability of certain noises keeps dogs on edge, triggering their fight-or-flight response, notes McGowan. Luckily, noise phobia can often be treated using desensitization and counterconditioning. “This means increasing exposure to the feared sound in an incremental way under pleasant circumstances. And pairing exposure to the feared sound with delicious treats to create a positive association,” says Dodman. (For example, play low-level fireworks sounds while playing with your pups and offering treats.) Another approach: provide your dog a safe place shielded from the noise. “Think tornado bunker, fully equipped with the things your dog loves, including you, food, toys and white noise,” says Dodman. In addition, thundershirts can be an effective tool to help someone cope with stressful situations. “Just as swaddling works to soothe infants, the constant low pressure of a thundershirt can be very soothing to nervous dogs,” says McGowan. Perhaps most important, a 2018 report in the journal *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* stressed that dogs

Vets can’t prescribe CBD products, but they may be able to recommend CBD products if needed for your dog. Follow your vet’s advice.



who show fear or anxiety when faced with loud or sudden noises should be assessed for pain by their veterinarians. It’s thought that dogs with certain types of chronic pain may tense their bodies when startled by noise, exacerbating discomfort.

Will CBD Help?

According to a 2019 report out of Colorado State University in Fort Collins, anxiety and noise aversion are two of the most common reasons pet owners seek cannabidiol (CBD), which is a compound found in cannabis and hemp, for their dogs. Right now, however,

the question of whether CBD can aid canine mental health remains unanswered. “Scientific studies on this matter are still in their infancy,” says Williams. “That said, anecdotally, those who’ve administered CBD to their dogs have reported that it has helped with issues like seizures, nausea and anxiety.” If you are interested in trying CBD with your dog, talk it over with your vet first. “Look for an oil or a tincture that has little to no THC and that’s free from pesticides, fungicides, solvents and additives,” says Williams. “And high quality CBD products are often expensive, but you don’t want to jeopardize your dog’s health to save

a couple of bucks,” says Williams. (Always introduce it in small doses to see if your dog has an adverse reaction.)

In the end, “know that if your dog is misbehaving in some way or acting out of the ordinary, that doesn’t always mean that your pet is willful or stubborn or dominant—or that it’s your fault,” says Borns-Weil. “It may simply mean that your dog needs a diagnosis—and your help.” After all, while a dog is for sure man’s (and woman’s) best friend, we are the same as our furry pals. We owe it to them to take their mental health as seriously as our own. 🐾