

Behavior Tips: *5 clues your dog needs behavioural help*

Like humans, our canine companions are unique individuals who vary in their temperaments, behaviors and needs. For any individual, context is critically important when assessing behaviour, which includes your dog's age and breed. You may expect your border collie to have natural herding instincts because of her breed but what happens if she starts nipping at your children's feet or circling your newborn baby? Would you consider this "normal" behaviour? The simple answer is 'no', not just because your dog is exhibiting undesirable behaviours, but more importantly – from the dog's perspective – these behaviours are often associated with anxiety, stress, arousal and/or fear.

Behavioural conditions and diagnoses aren't "one size fits all" and it's important to keep an open mind when acknowledging your pet's behaviour. Here are 5 (of many) clues that your dog requires a behavioural consult.

1. Your dog doesn't have an "off" switch

Anxiety is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of conditions. A dog who is described as constantly "hyper" but who will relax with increased engagement or activity (e.g., exercise) and can settle and sleep throughout the night, is different than a dog who never seems to tire regardless of intervention and who doesn't sleep throughout the night. The first dog just needs a lot of exercise. The second may be anxious. When observing the dog who appears to have no "off-switch", ask whether he tends to focus on the same object(s) and react consistently to it (e.g., excessive vocalization towards the mailman) or are there no recognizable provocative patterns and it seems like anything can set him off? Finding out what triggers your dog is a critical component to the diagnosis, and it's not separate from age, breed, and environment. It's also important that you understand *your* expectations and abilities. Note that *none* of this is controlled by your dog.

Dogs with anxiety disorders have been described as "aggressive" in some instances, which may be due to their underlying anxiety being unaddressed. Most aggression in dogs is rooted in anxiety. If you've recognized what "triggers" your dog, are you able to describe their behaviour before, during and after exposure to the stimulus? Dogs communicate their stress and anxiety through a variety of body language signals, some of which may signal that they have concerns but don't are not a threat and don't want to feel threatened. These signals are often called "calming signals" and may include:

- Yawning
- Head turning
- Lip licking
- Making yourself small
- Showing the belly
- Quickly putting the nose to the ground

Take note of your dog's calming signals and the timing of them, as these may be helpful in understanding your dog's concerns.

2. Your dog consistently reacts negatively towards other dogs

Dogs can be loud and active when they meet. How many of these behaviours are 'aggressive', how many are normal and when does 'normal' cross the threshold into "inter-dog aggression". True inter-dog aggression is when a dog has a consistent pro-active response that is inappropriate given the social context of the situation. "Pro-active" means that the victim hasn't provided reason (e.g., a signal) for a normal dog to be aggressive towards them prior to the attack or aggression. It's this 'pro-active' approach that distinguishes inter-dog aggression from normal squabbles and disagreements.

Another sign indicating that your canine may be "dog-aggressive" is if they control other dog's activities and access to spots to rest, what rooms they can enter, when they can seek attention from people or what toys they can play with.

There are several ways to manage these dogs and the sooner you seek help, the better it will be for you and your dog long-term.

3. Your dog falls apart when they're not with you

Many of the behaviours associated with separation anxiety are also those of a normal distress response (e.g., whining and barking at the door). In the case of true separation anxiety, behaviours become problematic either when you are physically absent, if the dog believes you are absent, or if your dog perceives that you are preparing to be absent (e.g., putting your shoes and coat on). At this time, your dog may display any of the following:

- Intense destruction
- Elimination
- Excessive Vocalization
- Salivation
- Panting
- Increased activity (pacing, scanning, increased vigilance)
- Decreased activity
- Escape behaviours
- Trembling/shaking

Because these signs are non-specific (i.e., can be associated with other behavioural problems), the pattern in which the signs are displayed is very important when separation anxiety is suspected. For example, your dog may begin by pacing and whining then progress to non-stop barking or destroying furniture as her distress intensified. This same pattern of behaviours may occur every time you leave. The pattern of timing, behaviours and the pattern of intensification all indicate that the dog is anxious and needs help.

4. Your dog reacts negatively when you touch their things

It's important that we don't normalize all behaviours our dogs display when we touch or remove their belongings. For example, consider a dog who whines after their toy's taken from them (i.e., a "normal" response) versus one who barks, growls, snaps, snarls, or bites when you try to remove an item from their possession. The second dog is responding aggressively and may have a condition such as impulse/social control aggression, possessive aggression, or even food-related aggression if the toy is a food toy. While not always wanting to give something up may be normal, frank aggression in the absence of deprivation is not. If your dog will not let you take things – do not normalize this behaviour. Seek veterinary help.



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5. Your dog "over-reacts" to noises

When we think of dogs that fear noise we often think of fireworks and thunderstorms, however, in some dogs even the ding of an oven timer or cell phone is enough to push them over the edge. Any response that indicates your dog is afraid, uncomfortable, or anxious (e.g., freezing, attention seeking) should be considered an extreme response to noise. This is because reactivity to noise affects your dog's brain function and every aspect of their life. No matter how mild or sporadic your dog's signs may seem, it's important to seek help as early as possible.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upej.ca).