

DECODING DOG BODY TALK

Three Signals of Anxiety

by Susan Briggs



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Family dogs frequently accompany us on errands and outings away from their familiar home environment and we want them to enjoy these expeditions, so understanding their view of the world is important.

To a dog, every experience is either familiar or unfamiliar. The first time they encounter a new sound, place or person, they may feel anxious. We can help with the adjustment by introducing them slowly to each new experience and step aside to provide them distance or space to observe it first at their own pace.

Knowing the “tells” that signal when

a dog is comfortable or uncomfortable goes a long way to a harmonious experience. Allison Culver, assistant director of The Lightfoot Way holistic animal learning center, in Houston, remarks, “Knowing how to communicate with your animal can save a lot of heartache.” With a bit of applied attention, we can readily learn to understand the changes in canine body posture and behavior that communicate their emotional state.

Start by observing the dog’s posture when they are relaxed at home. It’s likely that their weight is balanced on all four

legs and their mouth is slightly open; movement is relaxed, loose and agile.

When a dog feels happy or playful, notice how their ears may perk up or tilt slightly forward. Their tail might rise and wag, and they may emit a cheerful bark. Using their visual and audio demeanor as a baseline prepares us to be alert for three secret tells that signal a change in their emotion.

CLOSING THEIR MOUTH routinely occurs when a dog is unsure or anxious. When their mouth remains closed for a minute or more, it’s a sure clue that they need more time to process information.

LIP LICKING such as quick flicks of the tongue is meant to appease and may prevent an uncomfortable situation from escalating into anything resembling a confrontation. Dogs do it with each other and with us, too.

A LOOK AWAY that avoids direct eye contact likewise signals that a dog is urgently processing their current environment.

Norwegian dog trainer Turid Rugaas, author of *On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals*, identifies the lip licking and averting of the eyes as self-calming behaviors. She affirms, “When dogs are stressed by the environment, they start using calming signals to ease the stress.”

When this happens, first try creating more space or distance between the dog and any perceived threat; this may return them to their body language norm. If not, consider using holistic calming aids like a properly mixed lavender essential oil spray or Bach Rescue Remedy Pet flower essences, keeping these well away from their face.

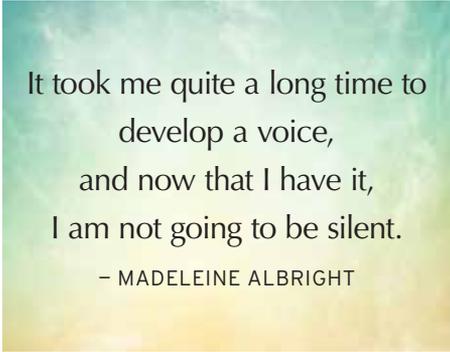
Also try mentally engaging the dog with learned cues. A quick game of sit, down, sit plus high-five allows them to engage in a familiar activity while they adjust to a new environment.

If the pet does not respond to

normal cues and continues to display multiple stress signals for an extended period, leave the scene altogether. Their anxiety hasn’t been relieved. If it’s still important that the dog learns to enjoy the troubling environment, work with a professional trainer that uses positive reinforcement tools to aid the transition (see *PetProfessional-Guild.com* or *apdt.com*). The trainer will assist in creating a plan that allows the pet to adjust at a pace that allows them to remain comfortable.

By observing a dog’s posture, we can be confident of choosing mutually good outings.

Susan Briggs, of Houston, TX, is co-author of Off-Leash Dog Play: A Complete Guide to Safety & Fun, co-founder of The Dog Gurus and owner of Crystal Canine (CrystalCanine.com).



It took me quite a long time to
develop a voice,
and now that I have it,
I am not going to be silent.

– MADELEINE ALBRIGHT