



Stress in our Dogs: Strategies for Stress Management

By Jacqueline Neilson, DVM, DACVB

While many of our dogs enjoy a “spoiled” lifestyle replete with comfy beds, regular tasty meals, and human affection, they also often experience stress (see *Stress in Our Dogs: Common Triggers & Signs*). These stressful events can result in compromised welfare and disease, including significant digestive upset commonly known as “stress diarrhoea” or “stress colitis”.¹

SIX STRATEGIES FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT IN DOGS²:

1. Safety first: Take steps to ensure the safety of all involved.

- a. This may include secure enclosures, segregation, supervision, etc.
 - i. A dog that tries to run away or escape during a stress trigger should be in a secure location and, ideally, supervised.
 - ii. A dog that exhibits an aggressive stress response should be physically segregated from the target of the aggression.

2. Advise against punishment to any dog showing signs of stress.

- a. Not only is punishing a stressed or anxious animal inhumane, it likely will increase the dog’s stress.

3. Identify and avoid — remove or minimise the stress trigger.

- a. While full avoidance of stress triggers is ideal, it is often not feasible. For example, one cannot avoid thunderstorms.
- b. When avoidance is impossible, minimise the stressful trigger via environmental modification.
 - i. If a dog is stressed by thunderstorms, the dog can be moved to an internal room in the home and white background noise can be played.
 - ii. If children stress a dog, avoid taking the dog to locations where children are likely to be encountered, such as playgrounds or schools. If a child is unexpectedly encountered, one can remove the dog from the situation or increase the distance from the child to minimise the dog’s stress.



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4. Initiate a Behavioural Modification Program.

- a. The two most common strategies for behavioural modification are Systematic Desensitisation and Counterconditioning.
 - i. Systematic Desensitisation: This is the process of reducing the dog's reactivity to a trigger stimulus (i.e., a stress trigger) via a gradual escalation of exposure to the trigger stimulus. By starting the exposure at a very low level and gradually increasing the intensity, the dog can acclimate to the trigger.
 - ii. Counterconditioning: This is a process of conditioning the dog to feel the opposite emotional state in the presence of the trigger stimulus (i.e., if they currently feel stress then the opposite emotional state is feeling relaxed). This is often accomplished by pairing exposure to the trigger stimulus with something fabulous, like food or toys, and is often done in conjunction with systematic desensitisation.

5. Recommend Hill's™ Prescription Diet™ i/d™ Stress in dogs up to 14kg with stress-related GI upset.

- a. i/d™ Stress is a highly digestible nutritional solution formulated with milk protein hydrolysate, prebiotic fibre, and ginger to help manage stress and reduce the risk of stress-related digestive upset. For optimal results, feed well in advance of the stressful trigger. This food is formulated for maintenance in adult dogs and is therefore suitable for long-term use for those dogs that may experience chronic stress.

6. Recommend ancillary activities, products and services to reduce stress.

- a. Examples of products on the market to reduce stress include pheromones, gentle pressure body wraps, and drug therapies.
- b. Certain therapeutic modalities, such as acupuncture or touch therapy, may help reduce stress in certain pets.
- c. Regular exercise may contribute to overall stress reduction.

¹Notari L. Stress in veterinary behavioural medicine. In Horwitz DF and Mills DS, editors. *BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine*. Gloucester, England: BSAVA, 2009:136-145.

²Palestrini C. Situational Sensitivities. In Horwitz DF and Mills DS Editors. *BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine*. Gloucester, England: BSAVA. 2009:169-181.

