



Is your dog stressed?

Does your dog sniff the ground when doing agility? Does your dog leave the ring looking for someone or something? Does your dog seek out tunnels half way across the ring? Does your dog stop on the top of the Aframe? Does your dog slow down significantly when you are running a course or sequence? Does your dog jump on you and nip or lick you? Does your dog occasionally stop and stand or sit in the middle of a course or exercise? Is your dog's tongue curled up when panting? Does your dog urinate or defecate in the ring or excessively outside the ring before entering? Does your dog seem to work farther and farther away from you during a run or does your dog work closer and closer and almost cling to you as the run progresses?

Each of these behaviors is very likely a sign of stress in your dog. This is a list of the most commonly seen stress related behaviors in agility but there are many others. It is very important for you as your dog's teammate to learn to recognize the signs of stress in your dog. Keep in mind that your dog may exhibit one or more of these behaviors and may exhibit different behaviors in different stressful situations.

I am now in the process of training my 8th agility dog (7th competition agility dog) and I have experienced the effects of stress on the performance of my canine teammates. Bradish was the first one to teach me about the effects of stress. I would have trouble with a sequence and would turn to my instructor for help and Bradish would immediately begin circling and sniffing the ground. Demi used to race in circles around the ring when she was stressed. Nigel showed his stress by leaving the ring and visiting the ring crew. Leysha shows her stress by slowing down to be sure she is right and by seeking out tunnels across the ring, she once went 30 yards across the ring away from me to run into a tunnel. Tobie shows his stress by becoming clingy to me and running in front of me while staring at me in utter confusion. Sonic, as many of you have seen in recent months, shows stress in a number of ways including leaving the ring, jumping up and nipping at me, seeking out tunnels across the ring or in front of him and defecating in the ring. My JRT puppy shows stress by dropping his tail down and sniffing the ground.

The earlier in your training you can identify the signs of stress in your dog the easier it will be for you to reduce the stress on your canine teammate.

What causes stress in our dogs when doing agility?

A number of things can cause our dogs to become stressed when training or competing in agility. The number one cause of stress in our canine teammates is the stress level in ourselves as their human teammate. Dogs are extremely sensitive to emotions and energy levels of humans, especially that of their human companion. They are also very sensitive to your attitude about a particular course or exercise.

How often have you seen your dog or someone else's dog perform beautifully in class or at home and then get to the show and act like they have never done agility before? The butterflies in your stomach as you approach the start line or the negative self-talk you give yourself as you watch others run is all being transmitted down the leash to your canine teammate. Your teammate is now worried and wondering what scary things lie ahead in that sea of agility obstacles. Your dog's confidence is vanishing quickly and stress sets in.

Maybe you have been stuffing treats down their throat or are frantically trying to potty them before your run? These are things that you don't normally do before exercises in class or before training at home so they quickly become associated with competitions and with that scary agility ring. From your dog's perspective they begin to feel like it is a scary place to be otherwise why would you be so worried and frantic?

Perhaps your dog misses weave poles or contacts "only in shows." Very often this is related to the human teammate doing something very different in the show ring than they would ever do during training. The human teammate wants that "last leg" desperately and is trying all kinds of maneuvers to make sure the dog stays in the poles or gets into the contact zone. Perhaps your tone of voice has just escalated to a higher frequency, or your body and hand motions have changed significantly and have startled or confused your dog. Our dogs will become stressed and confused if we change our tone of voice or body language in a trial from what we normally do in training.

Another situation that causes stress for many dogs is being around other dogs and people who are stressed. If you have worked hard like I have to reduce your own stress in competition but you still find that your dog is experiencing stress then it may be that your dog is feeling everyone else's stress. If you have ever been around the ring gate at an agility national competition you know how much stress and anxiety can be in the air. The dogs are feeling it too. Some dogs, like some people, thrive on that kind of excitement and get pumped for it and will actually have improved performance as a result of it. Other dogs and people suffocate with all of that stress and withdraw and shut down as a result of that level of stress.

Last but most important is what your voice and body language do when something goes wrong. This happens on course and in training all the time. Many times we as humans will show our disappointment in ourselves to our dogs when we make a mistake. Even though we know in our minds that it was our fault, we don't always make it clear to the dogs that it was NOT their fault. We show our disappointment with actions as subtle as a shoulder drop, or a slight change of tone in our voice, or as blatant as turning our backs on our dogs or yelling "NO!" or "COME!" in an upset or frantic tone. These actions can and usually do trigger stress in our canine teammates. I personally do not teach "call offs" to my dogs and I believe every wrong course is my fault – either my timing or handling caused it or my dog is very stressed and needs to relieve the stress by running into a tunnel (again my fault for not looking after my canine teammate). I would rather see a dog take a wrong course with confidence than run an entire course in fear of being wrong and being yelled at by the human teammate. I am also very very careful to never let my dog know I am upset with myself. If I need to beat myself up over a run I do that away from my dog <grin>. When working with an instructor and you make a mistake in a sequence the very FIRST thing you should do is praise and play with your dog. The second thing is to ask the instructor what happened. Always, always praise your dog first and never turn your back on your dog. I learned that lesson many years ago from Bradish who would shut down the minute I turned to talk to my instructor. I also don't let dogs wander around when I'm talking to someone – give them something else to do such as a sit or down stay. Don't let them take obstacles on their own or run around sniffing. Let them know you are still part of the team with them.

Does any of this sound familiar? It has happened to all of us at one time or another. If you are like me and tend to have very sensitive canine companions, it happens A LOT. I have struggled and I continue to struggle with how to reduce the level of stress in all of my canine companions. In the beginning most of the stress was on me. I used to have the worst case of "last leg" syndrome. My own worse case is that Bradish was 9 years old (competing in agility since 1 year of age) before he got the "last leg" of his Snooker Masters title because I wanted that title so badly and I would be so stressed before every run. It wasn't until I let go of that stress that we were even able to qualify again in Snooker. When I was really stressed Bradish would work farther and farther away from me, he didn't want to be close to me because I was too stressed for him – that didn't help us in Snooker either.

It is natural for us to be nervous before any kind of competition. It is natural for us to desire agility titles and placements and to desire to qualify for and to win national events. Often you will hear people say "if I don't feel butterflies in my stomach on the start line I know it is time to quit." Some people think they need to have that feeling of tenseness in order to compete well. Perhaps those people have been lucky enough to have dogs who also like to feel nervous before going in the ring. There are those dogs who are faster in competition and who enjoy

the adrenaline rush of competition (which is heightened by the nervous anticipation of the run). However not every dog is like that. In fact in my experience a vast majority of dogs are not like that at all.

So what can we do to improve our team's performance during stressful events?

The first thing to do is to recognize your dog's signs of stress.

Ask yourself what is my dog doing when in a stressful situation that is interfering with our team's performance? Once you have determined the signs of stress in your teammate then you need to determine what is happening prior to the onset of the stress that is possibly triggering the stress reaction. This may require videotaping both training and trial situations to compare things like tone of voice, body language, warm-up routines and examining your overall attitude. Pay close attention to what you do when something goes wrong in both situations – this is often a common trigger point for stress in your dog.

The second step is to look at yourself honestly and determine why it is that you are doing agility competitions.

If you are doing it solely for the ribbons, titles or fame and fortune then look at why your dog is doing it. I guarantee you that your dog does not care about the titles, or about winning the nationals or about the placements. The dogs just want to have fun and DO something with their human friends. There is nothing wrong with feeling or being competitive. What is wrong is when our feelings of competitiveness get translated to our dogs as signs that things are going to become very scary or that they have done something terribly wrong (when they didn't) or that this is when the human teammate acts very weird and different and causes confusion and stress. What happens with most of us when we start feeling competitive is that we put more pressure on ourselves to excel which translates to more pressure on our dogs to excel. Then when something goes wrong, the level of disappointment is escalated and conveyed to our dogs, which causes them to feel very stressed. The more times this happens and is associated with agility competition the more likely your dog is going to be overwhelmed with stress and shut down during competition.

The third step is to make sure you and your dog are motivated to do agility.

This may sound obvious and even simple. This step alone has been the topic of many articles, seminars and books. Finding what motivates your dog AND using it is the key to keeping your canine companion happy in this sport. One thing I have found surprising over the years of participating in this sport is how few people actually play with their dogs and play with them often. If you watch how dogs play with each other you will learn a lot about what they like to do and how they like to play. Too often we are afraid of looking foolish, or of upsetting the dominance hierarchy or of getting dirty or hurt if we actually play with our dogs the way they'd like to play. Many dogs like to roughhouse. I personally play rough with my dogs and I know they are relaxed once they start to bark and

lunge at me in play mode. If I cannot engage my dog in rough play then I know they are too stressed to do anything. Dogs will perform tricks under moderate levels of stress – it may not be as animated as they would do them at home in the kitchen but they will often perform the trick. However engaging in rough play requires the dogs to “let down their hair” much like it does people and if the stress level is very high they will be reluctant to engage in that kind of play in public. Playing tug is a good kind of play that dogs will usually engage in when under moderate levels of stress. Some dogs will be more willing than others. First teach your dog to play at home in a relaxed environment then begin playing with them at class or in training. What you are doing is getting the dogs used to engaging in play in increasingly stressful situations. Eventually if play becomes part of the warm-up routine it will act as a stress reducer. Play should also accompany training and be used as a reward at the end of every training exercise and at the end of competitive runs. When I have young dogs I take them different places and not only do I work on training exercises such as attention, sit, down, come etc., I also work on playing in different places. I want my dogs to be comfortable playing anywhere and anytime. This is very important because I hear too often “my dog won’t play in class” or “my dog plays a lot at home but not in public.” Engaging in play is very important to building the bond between you and your canine companion. It is also a lot of fun! I also know when I have a dog who doesn’t want to engage in play, usually in a trial situation, that their stress level is too high and I need to do something to reduce their stress before we enter that ring. It is one of those red flags of their stress level that I can read BEFORE we enter the ring.

The fourth step is to work on positive self-talk, positive visualization of running the course and relaxation exercises.

There are a number of good books and articles available on these topics to help. [Program Your Mind for Peak Performance \(That Winning Feeling!\)](#) by Jane Savoie is a very good book about visualization that is written for people who compete with horses but it can be applied easily to dogs. Learn to let go of that pressure to finish a title or to win a class. Trust me, it isn’t easy but once you are able to do it then it is well worth it. Focus on doing the best you can and on having fun with your canine teammate. The rest will fall into place. Learn to focus on the process of getting there rather than on the goal or endpoint alone. Visualize every step of your run and you are doing it perfectly as planned. Visualize where your dog will be going. I’ve seen it happen many times when handlers have walked off a course muttering about how their dog will go in the tunnel instead of the dog walk and sure enough when they run the course their body language sends the dog right into the tunnel. That negative self-talk is just as self-fulfilling as the positive self talk is. This will take several months of practice to be able to teach yourself to relax under pressure but will be well worth it. As part of this process you will probably want to find out (if you don’t already know) whether you are an “excitor” or an “inhibitor” meaning whether you are the kind of person who when stressed tends to be outwardly excited and externalize your stress and need less time to warm up or whether you are an inhibitor and need more time to warm up

because you internalize your stress. I know I am an excitor and I need to distance myself from competition because I can go from 0 to 60 in 2 seconds and I can become drained with too much anticipation and preparation. I have had my best runs when I run my dogs back to back and am able to just run up to the gate and run the dogs. The more I have to sit and wait for the run the more drained I become. You can do a similar analysis on your dogs. I have a couple of dogs who want a routine and take time to warm up and “get in the groove” and I have a couple of dogs who would prefer to go from the car to the ring and let’s just do it NOW – the more they wait around the more the energy and enthusiasm drains from them or the more the excitement causes them to lose focus and concentration.

The fifth step is to create routines for you and your dog.

If you find that your dog needs more warm-up time and you need less then you will want to find a balance between the two of you in order for both of you to be at your best. If your dog begins to be stressed at the ring gate or at the start line then create a routine for yourselves that takes you away from that area as much as possible and try to get to the ring gate at the last possible minute (working appropriately with your gate steward of course). Do the routine in practice at home and in class and before you enter the ring. The routine will become a calming pattern for you and your dog. I recommend including stretching exercises for both you and your dog as part of that warm-up routine. With my dogs, especially the ones who become stressed around other stressed competitors, I have a routine of stretches for both of us and I have a routine of tricks. Rather than shoving food in to your dog’s mouth try having them do tricks instead. It will take both of your minds off of the upcoming run and will give you both something fun to do. I don’t like to do obedience exercises before competing with a dog who is easily stressed because we as humans want “perfection” from the obedience exercise whereas we will accept a sloppier performance of a trick more easily. I will do obedience exercises with a dog who tends to get hyped before a run and who needs to focus attention on me in a structured way. It becomes important to know and understand your dog and what works best for them. I spend a good part of the first year of competition with a new dog trying different things to find what routine works best for that dog. I have also found that things can change over time. As a dog’s confidence grows they may become less stressed at the ring gate and more hyped in which case they may start to lose focus on you and become more focused on the dog running in the ring. At that point you may want to change your warm-up routine to one with more structured attention exercises.

One last note, if you find you have a canine companion who after trying all of these things still is experiencing a high level of stress when doing agility and appears to be “going through the motions” with you then it may be that agility is not the sport for them. Dogs are individuals and just because we really like something doesn’t mean our canine counterparts are going to like it too. We need to respect their differences and we need to realize that it is not a sign of

failure on our part as trainers. It is possible that some dogs just do not want to do agility just like some people do not like math, or some people are not artistic and creative.

Remember to be in tune with your dog and pay attention to how they are feeling and respect them as your canine teammates so that they too can continue to enjoy this sport as much as you do. Remember that agility is a game we enjoy with our dogs and not a matter of life and death.

Annelise and the Agile Canines

Demi, Jake, Bradish, Nigel, Leysha, Tobie, Sonic & Amigo

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