

The Canine Learning Stress-O-Meter

A little bit of stress is necessary for learning, but where do we draw the line?



EUSTRESS

Moderate or normal psychological stress interpreted as being beneficial for the experiencer.

DISTRESS

Extreme anxiety, sorrow, or pain.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Normal, non-exciting stuff is in the environment. The dog is awake, paying attention, and waiting but not actively aroused by anything. In other words: just chillin'.	Directly interacting but relaxed. Ears and tail are neutral to slightly engaged. Lips are soft. Overall, dog is loose but alert.	Often called "working mode." Increased arousal. Ears are a bit more forward and focused. Tail is a bit higher. Body may be a little stiffer as the dog is processing information. This dog's demeanor is focused and interested in their preferred payment (food, toy, game, etc.). May not enjoy being pet or cuddled right now.	Ears may be pushed back slightly. Body may be somewhat stiff. Mild distress signals start to appear, including lip-licking, look-away glances, full-body shake-offs, stretching, and paw raises. May start refusing to do known behaviors that have been cued, offering other known cues in place of the ones requested, and taking treats with more force.	Increased frequency of stress signals. Prolonged look-aways, scratching, yawning, squinting, panting, sniffing, turning away from handler, and getting distracted. May take treats with more force or refuse to work for the treat value they worked for previously.	Everything in Level 5 plus possibly becoming unresponsive to cues, snatching or refusing treats, vocalizing, exhibiting bursts of fidgety/fretful behavior, and redirecting frustration toward handler by grabbing body or clothing as if to play tug.	Everything in Level 6. May also see increased panting, drooling, and even sweaty paws. May see defensive behaviors when pressed to continue working such as growling and snapping. May see a shut-down in behavior with the dog disengaging completely and refusing to work at all.
"Ready when you are!"	"Let's work!"	"We're working. I like it!"	"I'm getting frustrated."	"I need a break."	"We should have already paused."	"Abort! Abort!"