

Movement Therapy for Pets with Anxiety

By Sabrina Bodden, Licensed Massage Therapist & Yoga Instructor

Just like humans, pets can experience an array of emotions. We can easily see when our pet feels joy and happiness, and can all too easily tell when they're unhappy. Another common emotion that pets experience is anxiety, especially when away from their owners, or when trying new experiences. Anything from riding in a car, to walking on linoleum, can cause a pet to go into what we know as "fight or flight" mode. This state is experienced in the body when the sympathetic nervous system is in control. Through certain movement exercises, we can teach a pet's nervous system to respond more calmly and go into the more relaxed state of the parasympathetic nervous system. I call this "Pet Yoga".



Pet Yoga offers a solution for our furry friends who suffer from symptoms of fear, restlessness, and nervousness. The name itself gives some humans anxiety about what I intend to do with their animal. Some people imagine a room full of dogs, rolled out on their backs, each on individual sticky mats, being instructed in Sanskrit how to live peacefully. Pet Yoga is nothing like that! Of course, our pets can't be taught in the same way as most humans can be. That's what makes the tools learned in a Pet Yoga session so valuable. They're designed for anyone who cannot understand verbal commands. So instead of trying to teach your dog how to take full and complete inhales and exhales, we can move their body in a way that allows for it to occur naturally.

The tools taught in a Pet Yoga session can be taught to pet owners so that the movements can be done regularly. For some pets, we see results right away. For others, it can take time. These tools originated in a yoga program called Spectrum Yoga Therapy. This program is taught to people with any form of Autism. Spectrum Yoga Therapy came out of the teachings of Alignment Yoga, which was created locally and is taught in Madison at the Mound Street Yoga Center, and in Blue Mounds at the Blue Mounds Dharma Center. I took what I learned in my time in the 200-hr Alignment Yoga Advanced Training and my time participating in the Spectrum Yoga Therapy classes, and have learned that the same principles apply to anyone with a nervous system that

is "up-regulated". That includes people dealing with chronic pain, anyone living with a lot of stress, and of course, our anxiety-ridden pets! I currently teach the pet specific Spectrum Yoga at Tabby & Jack's Holistic Pet Services and Supplies in Fitchburg, WI

Ways to help your stressed-out-pet

- Massage - providing touch is one of the best ways to calm the nerves. Don't just pet your dog, make an effort to massage their muscles and joints the way you would want to be massaged. Remember to give special attention to the back of their neck and under their arms, as these are areas that often hold tension and can contribute to a more anxious nervous system.
- Use therapeutic grade essential oils - Valerian, Vetiver, Lavender, Roman Chamomile & Ylang Ylang are known to be calming and grounding and are generally safe to use on dogs and horses. Cats are usually a bit more sensitive, so make sure to let your pet smell the oil before using it on them. If they run away, find another aroma.
- Check out www.thundershirt.com to learn about a product that is used by medical practitioners. I haven't tried it, but the evidence is convincing!
- Check yourself - far too often, our pet's issues mirror our own. If you have high expectations of yourself, work hard, judge yourself based on your accomplishments, or in other ways put a lot of stress on yourself, your pet may be expressing your anxiety for you. Look into meditation, yoga, massage, or whatever tool or tools you might enjoy putting into practice to ensure that you are a calm and grounded presence for your pet!

Sabrina Bodden is a Licensed Massage Therapist and Yoga Instructor in the Madison Area. For more information, or to schedule an appointment, go to www.facebook.com/BoddenHealth or www.sabrinabodden.com. To sign up for a dog specific Spectrum Yoga workshop with Sabrina, please contact Tabby & Jack's at 608-277-5900 or sign-up for the workshop online at www.tabbyandjacks.com