Is Your Dog Depressed?

By Alana Stevenson

Did you know that dogs suffer from depression just as we humans do? Usually, it is environmentally caused, and based on their social interactions—or lack thereof—with other animals, including people.

The most common causes of depression in dogs are lack of physical exercise, lack of mental stimulation, loneliness, and being scolded or punished too frequently. Dogs that are reprimanded or corrected inconsistently for behaviors that are often reinforced, albeit unintentionally, by humans, make a dog's world unpredictable. This may cause your pet to be anxious and depressed. Depression is when an animal gives up hope, has succumbed to despair and assumes that no positive change will take place or occur.

Animals live very much in the moment. They express how they are feeling, what they are taught, and what they know, through their behaviors. You can learn a lot about your dog by observing how he behaves.

If you suspect your dog is unhappy, lonely or depressed, here are some questions to ask yourself.

Is your dog exercised? Do you mentally stimulate your dog? Do you give your dog attention and affection? If so, how often? Dogs are pack animals. They are incredibly social. It is unnerving and very isolating for a dog to be left alone. Because dogs are inherently communal, they are very dependent on, and sensitive to, the behaviors of others. If a dog is under-stimulated, physically or mentally on an ongoing basis, chances are the dog is unhappy.

Do you keep your dog in a crate over four hours a day? If your dog remains in

a crate or cage for hours on end, he will be under-simulated and under-exercised. The pent up energy a dog accumulates by over-crating is simply too much to bear. As a result, the dog responds to any little trigger with overexcitement or over-stimulation. This causes people to react and become upset. Usually, they reprimand the dog or yell at the dog for misbehaving, which results in more crate time and confinement. This causes a vicious cycle that is hard to break. Dogs who are overly crated often end up depressed.

Does your dog self-lick or chew at himself incessantly? If your dog obsessively licks or chews at himself—providing there is not any underlying medical problem—your dog may be stressed, anxious or bored. Self-chewing and licking are displacement behaviors when the dog does not have a positive outlet or alternative way to relieve his anxiety or boredom. Too little structure or too many corrections or reprimands, along with too little exercise, and lack of mental stimulation, will cause a dog to exhibit such behaviors.

Does your dog jump on you constantly or bark at you and other people in the family? If so, your dog is probably getting mixed signals from you. Barking at you is a way to get your attention. Jumping is a submissive, attention-seeking behavior. It is not a confident gesture. If your dog is behaving this way around you, your dog is trying to appease you or seek your attention in the only ways he knows how. More than likely you are not leading the interactions or guiding your dog, but reacting to him. Your dog is anxious around you and does not know how to get what he wants without barking at you or jumping on you. These behaviors can be precursors to depression, especially if these behaviors result in punishments or too much crate time.

Dogs who are happy tend to have positive influences in their lives. They tend to engage in social play with other animals, including people. They usually are taught with rewards and praise. They get a lot of physical exercise and/or mental stimulation through activities, such as playing with other dogs, jogging, hiking, swimming, agility, or "go find" games. They are given friendly, gentle attention and are touched in a kind way through gentle stroking and/or massage. They do not spend much time alone and are not overly crated. When their owners go to work, they have a social companion such as another dog, or they have other animals in the family to be with.

By being aware of what causes depression and paying attention to your dog's behaviors, you can make your dog happy and encourage him to enjoy life. By playing with your dog, teaching your dog how to play, exercising your dog, and giving your dog positive attention and feedback, through praise and other rewards, you can pave the way for a happy, healthy relationship with your canine companion. ND

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