

Stress and the Therapy Dog
Or, What I Learned On My Summer Vacation
By Tara McLaughlin

After my family and I had spent all Saturday morning packing the car for our week vacation at the lake, we were finally on our way with our three dogs in tow. It's not everyone who takes their dogs on their only vacation for the year, but I bet you understand why I do. Does it make for the most relaxing vacation? Not necessarily, but our dogs go where we go whenever possible.

I already had a plan in mind for how I'd manage the dogs at the lake house . . . where they'd eat, how and when I'd exercise them, and what room they'd be in when we left the house. I'd packed an entire cadre of leashes, collars, harnesses, and treats. I was trying to keep everyone's stress level at a minimum . . . after all, this was our vacation.

But, my main concern was Toto, our new 5 year old rescue Yorkshire Terrier. Did I mention that Toto had never been away with us before, and he came to us with "issues"? Well, it was nothing I felt I couldn't fix with love, patience, and lots of clicks and treats. Besides, I had a "management plan" for our vacation, so we should be fine. But, there was a little red flag waving in my brain . . . something about stress . . . how Toto gets stressed easily. When Toto gets stressed he reverts back to his old behaviors, the ones he arrived with, the ones we are trying to fix . . . GUARDING! Remember, I told myself, try to avoid putting Toto in situations that trigger his stress. Except, just being in a new place would be highly stressful for him.

There are several reasons I can think of why we should recognize when our dog is stressed, but how it affects their behavior is one with which I'm most concerned. In Toto's case, stress triggers a guarding behavior, something I need to be aware of. In any dog, stress can trigger a behavior that would be considered unacceptable by humans.

It is our responsibility to recognize when our dog is overly stressed and protect them. Think about ways your dog may act under stress and look for whether your dog is displaying a cluster of displacement signals, or stress or fear behaviors. Either moving the dog out of a situation that is stressful, or removing the stressor, is a wise decision, but sometimes it's not possible. Trying to help the dog deal with stress by giving him something he can do successfully, with high levels of positive reinforcement, is often very effective.

Here are some ideas:

- Feed your dog high value treats.
 - Classical conditioning works and your dog will soon equate the scary, bad stuff, with something good happening.
- Have your dog target the palm of your hand or an object that concerns him.
- Teach your dog a behavior that comes naturally or something that is fun for him.
 - wave
 - spin
 - jump in the air

- Change the emotional climate by “jollyng up” your dog.
 - Carry a special toy for play.
 - Use a special word or phrase, such a “walk”, or “want to eat?” that you know makes your dog happy.
 - Teach your dog to do a playbow, which I equate to “putting on a happy face.”

Be sure to first teach, practice, and put these new behaviors on cue in a stress-free environment without distractions. Then, take it on the road, and teach your dog in various new locations slowly adding distractions. When the occasion arises, you can use your fun and positive toolbox of tricks to help your dog’s comfort level when you need to.

With some planning and management we can help to make stressful situations more pleasant. Planning always eases my stress, even if the plan doesn’t always work out exactly the way I had hoped. For instance, when I know I’m going to a new facility for a Therapy Dog visit, I try to make it less stressful by familiarizing myself with the facility. Then, when I do visit with my dog, I feel more comfortable and know the expectations.

This is what I do:

- Visit the facility first without my dog.
- Determine where to park.
- Figure out the fastest and easiest way in and out of the facility.
- Meet my contact person and acquaint myself with the staff.
- Ask if there are other animals that live or visit at the facility.
- Familiarize myself with the facility
 - Where is the bathroom?
 - What type of residents/clients will I be visiting?
 - What route will I take while visiting?
 - Where can I take my dog outside to relieve himself?
- Observe other Therapy Dog teams already visiting (without my dog)
- Clearly understand the facility’s guidelines for visitation and express my expectations.
- Keep the first visit with my dog short and sweet.

I instruct a CGC/Therapy Dog clicker-training class and recently discussed stress and displacement signals in dogs with the class. I asked everyone how their dogs behave when they were stressed, especially when they were out in public. I was surprised by how many of the handlers claimed their dogs didn’t show any signs of stress. It made me realize that most likely people aren’t paying very close attention to their dogs. Maybe they are too stressed to think about how stressed their dog is! Think about it. When we’re stressed, what are some ways we human beings act? Distracted, irritable, shy, biting fingernails, twirling hair, chattering nervously . . . these are just some of the things that come to mind.

If we pay closer attention to what we're doing when we're around our dog we may find we are creating stress in subtle ways for our dog. Dogs are the great readers of body language and we give away our emotions very clearly with how we stand, move, and speak.

For instance, are you:

- Hovering over your dog trying to reassure him?
This can be very intimidating to dogs rather than reassuring and reassurance isn't a concept they understand.
- Talking loudly or in a strident voice?
Dogs' hearing is exceptional and they can hear us barely whisper. Your tone of voice doesn't have to be harsh to have your dog do what you expect. It's much nicer for everyone, (residents, caretakers, dogs, and you), to speak in a gentle, casual way.
- Holding the leash too tightly?
This sends tension right down the leash.

There needs to be a balance, and it can be challenging sometimes. We need to pay attention to both our dog and what we're doing, which includes interacting with others while on Therapy Dog visits.

So, what did I learn on my summer vacation? Stress is unavoidable . . . even on a vacation! But, it's how we handle it that makes it a negative or positive experience for all of us.