



ASK THE TRAINER

A Study of Calming Signals

Stress signals, or “calming signals,” are particular behaviours that occur in context and in combination when a dog is feeling uncomfortable or threatened. Let’s pretend that you are stuck on a long elevator ride alone with a very scary looking person. Feeling intimidated and not looking for a fight in this confined space, you might move away, avoid eye contact and pick at your fingernails. These behaviours not only demonstrate that you may be a little bit stressed, but they also tell that scary person “I am not a threat, please do not bother me.” Dogs have a very similar, though very subtle, body language. Take a look at this link before continuing: <http://youtu.be/OrDgTAAZdM0>



This Beagle, Emma, did her best to tell Muffin the cat that she was feeling threatened and uncomfortable. Watch her ears drop and the lip-licks when her chin is on the floor and again

when she lifts her head. She is stiff and staring. She looks away from the cat, softening her eyes some, telling her, “You’re making me uncomfortable, please go away.” At around 0:28, she shows “whale eye,” a stiff and wide-eyed look to the side, showing the whites of her eyes. She looks away again, but when the cat steps in toward her at 0:35, Emma escalates from “please go away” to “go away or I’ll make you.” Look at the whale eye and frozen posture. This is not a comfortable or happy dog; she is barely tolerating Muffin’s behaviour. If I see these behaviours from a dog, I know that she is a moment away from a reaction and I’d better do something (or stop doing something) to avoid escalation! The cat backs off a bit and Emma is ambivalent, likely still hoping to diffuse the tension without conflict. The last straw is the cat batting her face, which she gets away with once before Emma becomes fully offensive. Just before the second bat, Emma’s lips contract, her commissures shortening forward and lifting into an “offensive pucker.” She doesn’t make a move forward until after being batted the second time.

Other stress/calming signals available to Emma, in addition to the lip licks, whale eye, freezing/tension, head turn/averted gaze, and stiff ears (forward or back), could have been yawning; panting; closing the mouth if she were panting (usually accompanied by stillness); ridges of tension around the eyes, mouth, and forehead; puckered lips; elevation from the base of the tail; and standing on her tiptoes. Dogs will also shake off as though wet, change their rate of breathing or blinking, scratch themselves, or sniff themselves or the ground.

This whole interaction was one minute and three seconds in length. Emma spent that full minute, and likely

some time before the video started, telling Muffin (in as polite a way as possible) that she was uncomfortable with her behaviour. Muffin, a cat who is obviously not savvy when it comes to dog behaviour, did not heed this message and pushed Emma to escalate. Muffin may be just a cat doing the weird things that cats do, but she was infringing on Emma’s space and making her very uncomfortable. Emma tried many times to diffuse the tension, but to no avail.

How often does this play out with people? How often are dogs forced into uncomfortable social interactions with each other? How often do we poorly equip our dogs for social interaction through poorly executed or non-existent socialization? How often do trainers get calls because the trusting and loyal family dog “suddenly” bit their child, “out of the blue with no warning”? Dogs are very tolerant of us, and we get away with more than is fair to our dogs. When you understand how to see stress it becomes all that much more obvious just how much we put them through, from daily life to teasing to abuse passing as “training.” Dogs have the right to say, “No, I don’t like that.” When we don’t heed their quiet stress behaviours as their method of communicating with us, often their behaviours get louder until we hear.

Resources

Contrasting Happy vs. Stressed Dogs (video) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jw6ONwp-42A>

“On Talking Terms with Dogs: What your Dog is Telling you” by Turid Rugaas <http://www.dogwise.com/itemdetails.cfm?ID=A251>

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