

Happy Dogs - Happy Owners

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To what extent can your knowledge of the dog body language help you improve the relationship with your dog? How can the relationship with your dog influence your own identity formation? Can training your dog open your eyes to be able to read dogs better? Do you REALLY understand your dog?



A happy dog & a happy owner (Eirun with her dog, Boyd)
Photo by E. L. Svarthaug

It is common knowledge that dogs can't speak the language people speak. Although we would like to believe that we understand dogs, we still mostly misunderstand them.

The fact that some people buy a dog having very little or no understanding of dog nature, and no willingness to research any further about the pet they choose to keep, makes it harder for dog owners to provide for the dog's needs and welfare. Actually, when it comes to further research about dogs, one should beware of misleading information, often coming from people's own experience with their dog, or from folk knowledge.

"In an ideal world what I would really like to do ... is sort of wipe the slate clean when it comes to [what people know about] dogs. Like in *Men in Black*, they press that pen and every memory or anything associated disappears, and you can then give them a new knowledge and understanding of what a dog is," states Dr. Sam Gaines. (Todd)

Dogs communicate through doing, a non-verbal language we can read if we look carefully instead of using our ears. If dogs were able to speak about their needs or what makes them uncomfortable, we could discover more about our dogs and form a stronger relationship with them. When we finally understand the language dogs use to communicate, we will be able to understand the individual dog's needs and welfare much better. Dogs, like human beings, are different from one another, and they have different personalities. There are several dog personality types, for instance, some dogs love attention while some are shy. To be aware of the signs the dog is trying to send you is an important factor to understand why they do what they do. This is significant to give your dog a happy life. (Todd)

There are several dog body parts that give signs. These include eyes, ears, tail, hair, mouth, movement and posture. The eyes are often said to be a window to the soul, so when you are looking at your dog, look into the dog's eyes. Be aware of the sclera, which is the white part of the eye, and acknowledge the focus and energy in your dog's gaze. When the dog feels stressed or intense, its eyes might look rounder than usual or the dog might show

more of the sclera. If your dog has expanded pupils, this can be a sign of fear. This is also the case when the eyes appear to be glassy. This might indicate the dog feels threatened, stressed or frightened. When the dog is relaxed, its eyes appear almond-shaped, with no sclera showing.

Even though the dog's ears can have various positions, and different dogs have different ears, all dogs can move the base of their ears backwards and forwards, depending on their emotions. If you look at the base of your dog's ear, you can see that when your dog feels relaxed, the ears might be somewhat towards the back or out to the sides. However, if your dog feels stressed or worried, its ears position will change. The ears will be pointed towards the subject of the dog's interest. When the dog's ears are pointing forward, the dog's forehead usually wrinkles.

The position of the base of the dog's tail and the way in which the tail is moving are the other two details you should acknowledge. When your dog is relaxed, it holds its tail in a neutral position, stretching out from the spine, or below the spine level. And when your dog becomes more excited or happier, its tail often rises above the spine level. The dog's tail movement might be a loose wag from side to side, or the movement can also be a circular motion. When your dog becomes more excited or happy, the tail will move side to side in a short, rapid movement.

Just like goose bumps on humans, the hair can rise along the dog's back, which is a sign of being upset or stressed. "Raised hackles" or piloerection as it might be called appears across the dog's shoulders, down the spine, and above the tail. Hackles don't necessarily mean that the dog is aggressive but can be a sign that your dog is upset or excited about something. If your dog feels frightened or stressed, it might also shed more than usual.

When the dog is relaxed, its mouth will be open, and the dog might be panting, with no facial or mouth tension. The corner of the dog mouth might be turned upwards. When the dog is fearful or intense, it will usually keep its mouth closed, as well as the dog might start to pull his lip towards the corners at the back (this is known as "long lip"). The dog might also start to pant fast when it is very hot outside. When the dog closes its mouth in response to something in its environment, it can be a sign of stress. If the dog starts drooling when food is not nearby, this can be a sign of extreme fear or stress.

A dog showing a physical warning will wrinkle the top of its muzzle, usually also pulling the lips up vertically to show the teeth. This is known as "offensive pucker." If the dog's muzzle is often wrinkled and the corner of the mouth is short, this is a clear warning. Combined with other signs from the dog's body, such as a tense forehead or hard eyes, and growling, it is a clear warning to anyone approaching. When the dog shows its teeth, it doesn't always mean a sign of aggression. Some dogs use that sign to show a submissive grin or smile. To make the right judgement, it is important to consider the whole body and the context. This way, it is easier to understand what the dog is trying to convey.

The dog also uses the entire body to communicate. During a play time the dog's body is usually loose and wiggly, with several pauses during the play. Pay attention to the dog's

attitude towards the play; if the dog looks stiff and moves slowly, or tries to escape the interaction, this is an indicator that the dog is not interested in social interactions. The dog will also make it clear when the session is over. This is indicated by sniffing, looking away or laying down.

When the dog is afraid, it might lean away, or lean back. There are also other signs that the dog might give to say it is scared or afraid. These include trembling, crouching, lowering the body or just the head, or rolling into the back or the side. The dog's eyes will often be fully open with large pupils to see what happens around. The dog's forehead will be wrinkled, and the dog's tail will be lowered. An extremely scared dog who might have been abused, or a very fearful dog might freeze completely for its body to be invisible. When you approach a dog like this, it might start to show an aggressive body language from the dog. The dog might also stand in the position with the head raised above the shoulders, and the body tense. The weight can be centered or over all four feet or can be in front, leaning onto to the front legs. (Aspcapro)

“Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read.” – Groucho Marx. (“80 Dog Quotes”) As much as we like to believe that we give our best friends – our dogs a happy life and provide for their needs and welfare, in fact we might only scratch the surface, not even near to really understanding what the dog might be going through. We might not be brave enough to look into the dog's eyes to see what we might be doing wrong. However, there are solutions to improve every relationship, so start to act. Learn a new language, the dog’s secret language, its body language. Understand dogs by observing your own dog’s movements. Don’t close your eyes when being around your dog. Instead, try to read your dog literally and in between the lines. Only then can you develop your dog’s true happiness.



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Photos by E. L. Svarthaug

There is way more dogs can do for us than teach us about the power of body language. They can also teach us how to be happier in a busy life. Dogs' unconditional love and joy can make owners believe that their dogs' love can heal pain. In addition to that, dogs can reduce stress or anxiety, ease the symptoms of depression, PTSD or bipolar disorder. Furthermore, owning a dog can help us make small changes in our lives which will benefit our well-being. Having a dog is likely to increase the amount of exercise (walks, hikes or runs). In fact, the study shows that people who own a dog are more likely to meet their daily exercise requirements. (Robinson)

Another important factor improving your well-being, is a sense of companionship provided by your dog. Being responsible for a pet can bring emotional changes such as the feeling of being wanted and needed. Furthermore, touching and stroking the dog is an effective method to lower the blood pressure which makes you feel calmer. (Robinson)

How can developing a meaningful relationship with one's dog impact your own identity? Well, it seems clear to me that developing a meaningful relationship with one's dog can facilitate your own identity formation and happiness.

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