

Calming Signals

Calming signals and stress indicators are body gestures and behaviours used by dogs to communicate with those around them. Learning to recognize and understand them helps you connect with and communicate with your dog.

What they do

They are used to communicate a variety of emotions and needs to others, including:

- I am feeling threatened, please back off
- You look nervous, I want to be your friend
- I am nervous and my body is tense
- I am uncertain, and need a second to think
- I have just been very tense, and need to release stress
- I am a member of dog society, and I follow the rules

Why do humans need to know about calming signals and stress indicators?

Learning about calming signals and stress indicators, is *essential to building a solid trusting human-dog relationship*. Without the knowledge of how your dog is feeling or what he needs, you may be constantly frustrating and possibly overwhelming your dog friends. Calming signals can help us:

- Recognize how dogs are feeling in general
- Recognize when dogs are feeling uneasy, and to help them out
- Recognize when dogs are settling in, and when they are ready to participate
- Meet new dogs in an acceptable way
- Diffuse aggressive displays
- Help our dogs become more well-adjusted

Calming Signals are human-friendly

Not only can we receive information from calming signals, *we can send information by using calming signals!* Watch for the 😊 symbol when reviewing the calming signals. These indicate the “human-friendly” calming signals, which means we can use these calming signals in the very same way that dogs do: to diffuse a threat, to calm a friend down, to indicate friendly intentions.

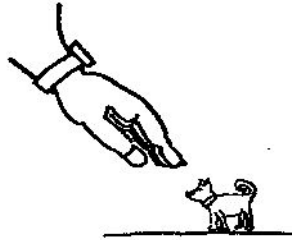
Illustrations generously provided by DJ Blower

Copyright © 2022 by The Shamanic Dog Trainer. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the author.

“I am tense” – Stress release

These are the most frequently observed calming signals. They indicate low-level concern, tension or excitement.

A tense flicking of the tongue across the nose and top lip.



Licking lips



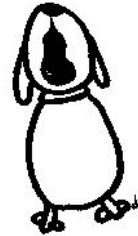
Scratching

A sudden and intense scratch that happens in the middle of something, to interrupt things and release nervous energy.

The “after shake” usually follows an uncomfortable, exciting or tense event.



Shaking off



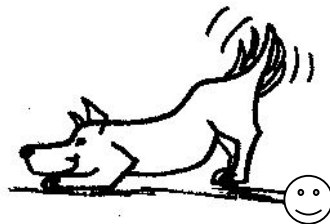
Yawning

Quick yawns with tension in jaw, mouth and ears. Different than sleepy yawns.



Human-friendly: Use deep breaths, sighs, humming or singing.

Releases built up tension in the body.



Stretching /Bowing Slowly

Human-friendly: Unlock joints and loosen muscles to stay fluid and avoid tension.

Also:

- **Sneezing** – Fast and intense sneezes used to release excess energy.
- **Blinking** – Slow and deliberate blinking tunes out uncomfortable settings and situations.
- **Checking genitals** – Especially in young dogs. A variation of scratching, but instead the dog licks and sniffs his or her own genitals.

“I feel threatened” – Diffuse Threat

Dogs are naturally non-confrontational, and most dogs avoid threat whenever possible. The key is to notice these gestures and what settings and situations your dog finds threatening or uncomfortable, so you can provide safety and support whenever needed.

Avoiding eye contact. Sometimes misread as being disrespectful or not paying attention



Averting eyes



Human-friendly: See below



Freezing



Typical “flight or freeze” response. Sometimes misinterpreted as stubbornness or defiance.

Human-friendly: See below

Pretending to not notice what is going on. May sniff ground, pants, refrigerator.



Sniffing ground



Human-friendly: See below



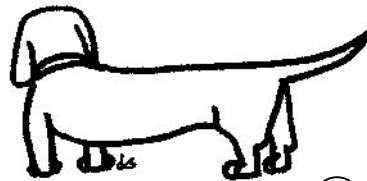
Turning head



Extension of averting the eyes. Sometimes misinterpreted as disrespectful or not focusing.

Human-friendly: See below

Further progression of averting eyes and turning head. Also mistaken for disrespect or lack of interest.



Turning body



Human-Friendly – if you feel threatened by a dog: avert your eyes (without losing sight of dog), turn your head, turn your body, and be still. Turn your focus and attention to another object, to show you do not want any trouble and mean no harm.

“You look nervous”- Reassuring another

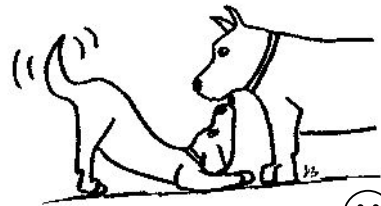
To encourage interaction and trust, dogs reassure one another with these gestures. They are based on appearing non-threatening and non-serious. The name of the game is sweet and small.

Classic non-threatening pose:
all the weight is on the back
end – no way to lunge or strike
in aggression.



Bowing

General silliness. By licking,
nuzzling or poking the face of
another, a dog is clearly
showing friendly intentions.



Playing puppy

Human-friendly: initiate playful energy with clapping, friendly chatter, funny sounds, etc.

Smaller is safer!
No chance of being aggressive
or threatening from this
position.



Lying down

Human-friendly: make yourself smaller by crouching, sitting or lying down.

NOTE: only do this when there is no danger that a nervous dog may lash out in aggression.

“I am uncertain” – Please slow down

These are most frequently observed in dog training sessions – when dogs are being introduced to new and unknown ideas, lessons and challenges. It is important to notice when your dog feels uncertain and respond with support and safety. This is how deep trust and influence are solidly built.

When he or she needs some time to process things.



Freezing



Wagging tail- white flag

A slow low wag indicates uncertainty.

Sitting suddenly, in the middle of a lesson or other situation.



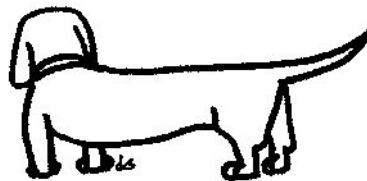
Sitting



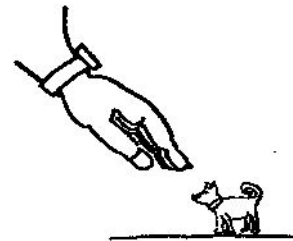
Sniffing ground

Avoiding behaviour.

To disengage with an uncomfortable situation or individual.



Turning body



Licking lips

A quick lick over the lip and nose.

The ultimate indication that things are getting too uncomfortable.



Lying down

NOTE: Most of these calming signals are frequently mis-read as defiance, stubbornness or lack of focus during training sessions. Most often, the dogs are expressing their needs for extra time or space to process what is going on.

Social Gestures

This is what dogs do to let each other know that they are part of dog society and they follow the rules.

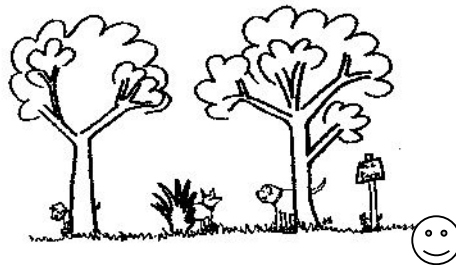
The proper greeting is to curve around and sniff bums.



Curving around

Human-friendly:
Let your dog curve around when approaching you or another dog. Also, curving as you approach dogs is very polite and friendly.

Leaving markings for others to sniff and also sniffing the markings of others.



Marking

Human-friendly:
It is important to allow your dog to leave markings and also to sniff the markings of others.

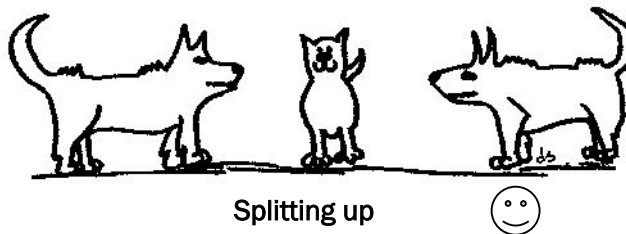
An invitation for others to sniff offers a chance to spend time together without direct interaction.



Sniffing ground

Human-friendly:
Offering something to sniff or look at is a way to spend time together without direct interaction.

Coming between to break up tense situations.



Splitting up

Human-friendly:
Sometimes you need to step into situations to break the tension.

Stress Indicators

Stress causes energy levels to increase. This happens in “good” and “bad” situations.

Your dog will display certain behaviors as his stress level, or energy level, rises. Listed below are general stress indicators that many dogs display, however your dog may have his own unique stress indicators.

Stress indicators often mean that your dog is having trouble coping – even in situations of intense excitement, a dog can become overstimulated and stressed.

Stress indicators are escalations from calming signals. Use them to gauge whether your dog can continue participating, or if he is unable to function.

Stress indicators include:

- Mounting, especially in young dogs.
- Jumping up, often “flexing” the feet and holding onto you.
- Urinating, defecating.
- Panting.
- Drooling.
- Wheezing or whining or barking.
- Flopping onto his side.
- Becoming physically unruly.
- Mouthing.
- Licking.

Sometimes dogs display these behaviors, and they are not actually stress indicators. You can decide by looking at the context. Is it a new situation for him, a new skill you are trying to teach? Are you tense? Has there been an upset in the household?

A rule of thumb is: if you find yourself thinking, “Gosh, I haven’t seen him ever do that”, or “I haven’t seen him do that in months”, chances are it is a stress indicator.

For Example:

Reactions to “negative” stress

- Your dog may pant and drool when he is at the vet’s.
- He may jump up on you when a group of dogs he doesn’t know is approaching him.

Reactions to “positive” stress

- Your dog may start barking intensely when you drive up to the dog park.
- She may pee on the carpet when her favourite person arrives.

Important: You will notice that many of these stress indicators may be very frustrating for you to observe. Many are easily interpreted as inappropriate behavior. Please understand that your dog needs your help when he is displaying stress indicators.

Mapping Your Dog

