

**Chapter 20: Recognizing Stress in Your Dog & Finding the Balance**

In this chapter, we’ll take a look at some of the stress factors in your dog’s life and give some tips to help you maintain balance in your relationship with your dog. So far, we have talked quite a bit about positive reinforcement. It is certainly important, but equally important is learning to correct poor behavior effectively and efficiently. Working guides must maintain a high standard of behavior, especially when out in public. No dog is perfect, and they will all choose to “act like a dog” on occasion no matter how much preparation and training they have had. In addition, working dogs are always under a degree of stress. Their stress levels can increase when adjusting to changes in environment, routine, and handler, and can often result in a variety of undesirable behaviors.

**Recognizing and Alleviating Stress in Your Dog**

 As we’ve mentioned before, some degree of stress is an unavoidable part of any guide dog's life, as it is with any human. Some of that stress comes from the environment, changes in the dog's life, or from the work itself. But some of a dog’s stress is inevitably created by the handler. Despite your best efforts, you will not be 100% consistent. Your timing of correction will not always be perfect. You will not always react quickly enough for the correction to be effective in the dog's mind. Therefore, there will be times when the dog is not going to understand why it is being corrected. Other times you will correct the dog because you think it is doing something wrong, only to realize afterward that the correction was unwarranted. If you were uncertain about giving a correction, build the dog back up with the same level or higher amount of praise. If you are as consistent as possible and generous with positive reinforcement, your dog will be more accepting of an occasional ill-timed or unneeded correction without building excessive stress or worry. This is another reason why praise is so important. Stress in dogs can manifest in a variety of ways. Here are examples of things to be aware of:

* Increased distraction - higher intensity or greater tendency to engage with distraction. Dogs feeling stress may seek comfort by engaging with other dogs or people.
* Sniffing – Similar to other distractions, many dogs find sniffing behaviors very soothing and will seek out opportunities to drop or plant their nose.
* Excessive licking, chewing, scratching – some dogs may begin to obsessively chew at their leg, paw or tail to the point of causing damage
* Alert barking – Uncharacteristic barking especially when alarmed or concerned.
* Protective of space – growling or barking at another dog in close quarters can also be a product of stress

Some stress-related behaviors, like distraction, need to be discouraged using the correction techniques discussed in another chapter. However, many other behaviors can be gently discouraged by physically touching your dog or speaking to them in a low, calm tone of voice. Consistent handling, clear expectations, and generous praise are important factors in alleviating stress and maintaining a happy, healthy dog. Other things you can do regularly to help alleviate stress are offering adequate play time each day, massaging your dog regularly, and providing toys/bones for your dog to chew during downtime. If you believe that your dog is exhibiting excessive stress behaviors, speak with your instructor to help formulate a plan to reduce stress.

**Finding the Balance**

 So, how can you keep your dog under good control and working well without creating or compounding stress? Here are a few more guidelines to help you be successful:

* Be as consistent as possible in every interaction with your dog. Maintaining reliable leadership during downtime as well as while working will help your dog learn to trust you. Discourage what you don't want but reinforce heavily for what you do want.
* Be aware of your own emotions. Dogs can sense our emotions and will feel what is coming down the leash. If you feel angry, scared, or frustrated, your dog will pick up on that and can be affected in a variety of ways. When you feel stong emotions or stress coming on, try to take a few moments to reassure your dog with quiet praise and petting. This may even help you manage your own emotions at the same time.
* Understand that distractions are an everyday part of a working guide dog’s life. All dogs will show some level of distraction, and it may change from day to day, especially during your first weeks and months together. Try to be patient and work through each situation as it comes up.
* Be patient with yourself as well. We are all human and bound to make many mistakes as part of the learning process. If you find something is not working, slow things down and think about fundamentals, sequencing and clear communication.
* Balance is so important! Correct when necessary and balance with plenty of praise and reward when appropriate. Use all techniques in a consistent manner to strike a fair and reasonable balance. Provide leadership, but also provide play and fun for your dog.
* And most importantly, ENJOY YOUR DOG!!! Dogs are amazing creatures, each an individual. Appreciate your dog for who they are, and they will teach you everything you need to know....

*Updated September 2020*