

Preventing Holiday Stress

Keeping your dog relaxed and happy during the holiday season

*Susan Sarubin, Certified Professional Canine Behavior Consultant
and Trainer*

As the song says, "It's the *most* wonderful time of the year!" The holiday season is a time of family gatherings, festive celebrations, music and singing, hanging decorations, trimming the tree, good food and drink, and sometimes travel to spend the holidays with those we love.

While we may enjoy many of these holiday activities, they can also cause a significant amount of stress in people...shopping for gifts, wrapping presents, sending out cards, entertaining, attending gatherings, and the overall hustle bustle of the season can be a bit overwhelming. Our dogs (and cats, too!) may not only pick up on *our* elevated stress levels but can become increasingly anxious themselves due to all the environmental changes occurring during the holidays.

You've probably noticed that your dog does not like change, so the increased activity and disruption to your dog's routine during this time can be particularly anxiety producing. Changes in schedules for both you and dog, visitors to your home, frequent deliveries at the door, strange decorations, even rearranging furniture to make room for the Christmas tree, can cause elevated stress levels in our pets.

While it's impossible to eliminate the stress of the holiday season for our best friends, there is a lot we can do to minimize it.

- **Maintain your dog's routine.** As much as possible, keep feeding times, walking times, bedtimes, training sessions, etc., on schedule. If you normally snuggle in the morning before getting out of bed or play a game of tug or fetch before leaving for work, make time to keep up these traditions.
- **Make exercise a priority.** The benefit of exercise as a stress reducer is well known for humans...the same benefit applies to your dog. No matter how busy and rushed you may be during the holiday season, be sure to make time to provide your dog with sufficient exercise. A rigorous game of fetch, tug, other chase or seeking games, or a vigorous romp with a canine bestie, go a long way in reducing stress and anxiety.
- **Provide enrichment.** Interactive toys and puzzles that require figuring out how to access food and treats placed inside provide much needed enrichment for your dog - also a stress reducer.

In addition, enrichment games and activities, such as sniffaris (sniffing walks) and hide and seek using treats, provide the same benefits.

- **Provide a safe space.** As much as you may want your canine family member to be a part of family gatherings or when entertaining guests, most dogs are generally happier in a quiet area away from all the action. Groups of people laughing loudly and milling about, strangers reaching to pet your dog's head, children tugging or hugging them, can be overwhelming and lead to all sorts of stress signaling behaviors...pacing, whining, panting, even snapping and biting! Prevent your dog from becoming uncomfortable in these situations by providing a safe space in a quiet room with the door closed or behind a baby gate (or in a crate if crate-trained) with a comfy bed, favorite toys, an interactive toy or puzzle, and some soft, soothing music playing in the background to minimize the noise coming from your celebration.
- **Try Calming Aids.** If you already know that your dog is particularly anxious about the disruptions the holiday season provides in general, or specifically when you are entertaining, there are a number of calming aids and supplements designed to help calm and relax your dog. Speak with your veterinarian about trying a natural supplement such as Zylkene or L-Theanine to help your anxious dog. Calming collars, body wraps (e.g., Thundershirt), and D.A.P. (dog appeasing pheromones) in either spray or room diffuser applications, may also aid in alleviating stress and anxiety.

Keeping our dogs' health and well-being a priority during a busy holiday season is a challenge, but one that can be met successfully with some awareness, planning, and a little extra effort. Your dog, after all, is a cherished member of the family and deserves to enjoy this season of giving, thanks, and love, as we all hope to.

Happy Holidays to you and yours, both two and four legged!