



Holiday Cheer or Holiday Fear?

The Hustle and Bustle can Worry the Furry Ones

By Pat Blocker, CPDT-KA

Holidays are busy and chaotic, a season when time and patience are limited. Humans view holidays far differently than dogs do. We're easily consumed by the joys and general hubbub whereas dogs can become anxious and confused by changes and chaos. Therefore, let's include them in a seasonal stress management plan.

Holidays can mean interrupted schedules. Homes are transformed by decorations and new scents. Extra vacuuming happens. People are invading your home. Furnishings, dog beds and even feeding areas might get rearranged to accommodate guests. Edible temptations are abundant bringing potentially more conflict between dogs and humans.

Let's explore some hazards and challenges that exist for pets during the holidays.

Guest arrivals: Holiday visitors may lead to doors accidentally left open and pets being stepped on or tripped over. Open doors can be seen by pets as an opportunity to escape.

Avoid chaos by keeping Sparky at a comfortable distance from the door. Reward him with treats for calm behavior. If Sparky becomes anxious about visitors, keep him in another room. Play calming music to muffle the sounds of company. Provide his favorite chew bone or dog toy stuffed with treats.

Dangerous foods: Candy, chocolate, nuts, caffeine, grapes, raisins, and alcohol are a few things that are toxic to dogs. Cellophane wrapping and aluminum foil is dangerous if swallowed.

Decorations: Stow wires and cords out of your dog's reach to prevent chewing and entanglement. Keep candles out of the wagging zone and never leave burning candles unattended. Tinsel, if ingested, is another decorating hazard to pets.

Additionally, cleaning supplies, packing materials, and poisonous plants are potential perils.

Nervousness: If your dog's anxiety about visitors is mild and manageable, employ a trainer's help for solutions. For high anxiety, consider alternatives like boarding or staying with friends. If these options aren't available, training can help your dog to feel comfortable in a crate or another room when guests are present.

Conversely, isolation can be stressful for the people-loving dog. Calm the chaos by training Sparky that the doorbell is a cue to go to place and chill. Then he can join the activity.

Inclusive activities: Dogs can feel neglected, jealous, or bored when we're focused on festivities. Give Sparky something special like a marrow bone or Kong® stuffed with healthy treats while you enjoy your holiday meal.

Place your dog's presents into gift bags and let him discover the treasure inside. Some dogs enjoy ripping off paper and tearing into a cardboard box to find the prize. (Always supervise this activity.) If you celebrate with a Christmas tree, don't place edible pet gifts underneath. Ask gift givers if their offering contains anything tempting or harmful to pets (like chocolate) before placing it under the tree.

Many people enjoy a walk or hike after a whopping holiday meal. Take Sparky along!

Recognizing signs of stress and/or fear

Following are some common signals dogs use to indicate that they feel stressed.

- **Tongue Flicks**
- **Turning or looking away**
- **Walking slowly or freezing**
- **Splitting** (Dog physically places himself between people or dogs)
- **Paw lift**
- **Wide eyes** (Showing the whites and dilated pupils)
- **Blinking**
- **Ears flattened**
- **Growling/baraing teeth** (Exposed teeth and wrinkled nose is a warning signal. Lips drawn back horizontally showing front and back teeth is indicative of fear.)
- **Tail Wagging** tails aren't always happy. Tails held high and stiff with slow, intentional, back-and-forth movement signal a threat.
- **Hair** Increased sudden shedding and or excessive dander.
- **Displaced behavior** Dogs engage in displaced behaviors when they need comfort or to escape. They are normal, familiar behaviors done out of context.
- **Yawning**
- **Scratching**
- **Licking**

Solutions for anxious dogs

Try calming supplements like Bach Flowers or anxiety wraps such as Thundershirt®. Consult your veterinarian before giving supplements or medication.

It's said that a tired dog is a good dog. This can be true, but not necessarily a cure-all. Give Sparky his regular exercise, (maybe a bit more) keeping him on his regular routine.

Boarding, sitting, road trip?

If your dog is happy being around other dogs, boarding is an option. Remember that current vaccinations (including bordatella and canine influenza) are required.

If boarding stresses your dog, consider a sitter. There are reputable, professional sitters available offering in-home daily visits and overnight stays. Ask your caretaker to follow Sparky's usual routine as closely as possible to reduce stress.

Choose wisely. Vet sitters and kennels as you would caretakers for your children. Book early. Most services fill months in advance of the holidays.

If your dog travels well, you may want to take him along. Here are some tips for a safe, enjoyable trip. (These tips apply mainly to road trips. Flying with your dog is more serious and complicated. I do not personally advocate flying animals as cargo.)

Take:

Food, fresh water, treats, bowls

First-aid kit

Collar/ID tags (with cell phone number—your home number is useless when you're not home)

Vaccination records, medications

Leash/harness

Kennel/Bedding

Favorite toys

Do:

Plan for pit stops. Know how often your dog needs to go.

Safely contain/restrain your dog with safety harness or in kennel.

Find out if other pets will be present.

Research pet friendly hotels and their policies in advance.

Don't:

Leave your dog unattended in a vehicle.

Let your dog off leash at rest stops.

Dogs require supervision and a routine to ground them during holiday activities. We can help them ride out the challenges with a good plan. Happy holidays!

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