

# STRESSED OR “DISOBEDIENT” – CAN YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE?

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When my dog Remy was very young and just getting started in agility, we were enrolled in a weekly class at a local training center in Columbus. (This was during my vet school years.)

Every week, the dogs practiced jumping, running through tunnels, climbing over A-frames, and running basic sequences of obstacles so that we could practice our handling maneuvers. Remy liked agility, and he was a fantastic worker – as long as there were treats involved, he was laser-focused and full of enthusiasm.

One day, we set up to run a short sequence of jumps. I left him on a sit-stay at the start line, marched confidently out to my starting point, and gave my release cue: “Remy, jump!”

But oddly – especially for good, reliable Remy – he didn’t jump.

Instead, he left his sit-stay, trotted off a few feet to one side, and began sniffing the floor with great interest.

Ah, well – dogs get distracted sometimes, don’t they? And the floor of a busy training center is a veritable smorgasbord of fascinating smells. No worries! I went back to him and got his attention, then set him up again to run the sequence.

I walked out to the other side of the start line, put out my hand, and called my dog.

“Remy, jump!”

And watched, flabbergasted, as he hesitated slightly – then walked away and resumed sniffing the floor as if he'd never encountered anything so interesting.

The instructor and I puzzled over this for a moment. And then, she hit upon the problem.

The jump had wings attached.

A basic, practice-style agility jump is very simple – just two PVC uprights, with a single jump bar in between. This is what Remy was used to seeing.

However, many of the jumps used in competition settings have detachable side structures called wings. These can be solid panels of colored wood, woven lattice, striped fabric, or anything else you can imagine. They make the jumps look pretty, but they also add an extra element of complexity to the course by changing the dog's approach angle and limiting how close you can get to the jump itself. It's also common to use them in class settings for certain types of handling exercises.

In many classes, winged and non-winged jumps are used interchangeably for various sequences, so either the instructor or I had thought much about it. But for Remy, a beginner dog with very limited experience, seeing a jump with these big, unwieldy shapes jutting out to the sides for the first time was rather alarming.

So when I asked him to take the jump, he was anxious and confused. And he did what many dogs do – he “changed the subject” by turning away and sniffing the floor.

To test her theory, the instructor removed the wings and asked me to try one more time. I set Remy up, and called him again. This time, he sailed happily over the jump and ran the entire sequence with no problems at all.

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I tell this story to every new group of beginner obedience students I teach, because I think it illustrates an incredibly important point.

Dogs get stressed in new environments, or when they're learning new things – just like us! On some level, I think we get this. Most of us have felt anxious or uncomfortable in a strange social setting, or when struggling with a difficult concept in school.

But for many owners and novice trainers, signs of stress in dogs don't always look like we expect them to. They're often subtle and easy to miss. And here's the kicker: an awful lot of the time, they can look like “disobedience” or lack of attention... which makes us frustrated, and inclined to scold or correct the dog for ignoring us.

This is counterproductive, and also terribly unfair.

Instead, we would do better to recognize that our dog is struggling, and make things easier to help him succeed.

For Remy, once we realized that the jump wings were new and a little scary for him, we went back to basics with a single winged jump. He was allowed to sniff and investigate it as much as he wanted, and got lots of praise and rewards when he tentatively hopped over the bar. Within a few minutes, he was jumping happily again and we were able to resume the sequence as before.

Other subtle signs of stress in dogs that you may not recognize at first include the following:

Lip-licking

Yawning

Scratching

Not taking treats

Looking away

Does this mean that these behaviors are *\*always\** signs of stress? No – of course not. Dogs sniff things all the time! They also scratch when they're itchy, and yawn when they're tired.

Sometimes, as the saying goes, a cigar is just a cigar.

BUT. It means that if your dog consistently gets an itch every time you ask him to heel, or yawns repeatedly when you practice your sit-stays, or conveniently finds an interesting spot on the ground to sniff when a stranger wants to pet him, you should pay attention.

Figure out what's bothering him, and see if you can do something to fix it.

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