

The No. 1 Overlooked Cause of Pet Anxiety (and What to Do About It)

If your dog is nonstop barking, has a poor appetite, or exhibits destructive behavior, these may be signs of anxiety that need your attention. The problem may not be solely emotional, but also physical. Here are some strategies to help your pet cope with stress.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Stress activates internal systems that affect hormones, digestion, and emotions, making your dog more reactive and harder to soothe without support
- A healthy gut supports the production of calming brain chemicals like serotonin. Bone broth, kefir, and probiotics can lead to noticeable improvements in mood
- Low magnesium, zinc, and omega-3s leave your dog's nervous system overstimulated. Nutrient-rich foods and targeted supplements can restore emotional balance
- Chamomile, valerian, Reishi mushrooms, and pet-safe CBD oil ease tension without sedation — helping your dog relax during storms, travel, or time alone
- Creating a quiet, safe space, sticking to a routine, and rewarding calm behavior build trust and emotional security for your anxious pet

Is your dog pacing when you leave the house? Barking for no clear reason? Chewing up shoes, furniture, or even their bed? These aren't just "bad behaviors." They could be signs your dog is struggling with anxiety.

Just like humans, dogs can experience stress, and most of the time, they exhibit it through their behavior. The good news is that there are gentle, natural ways to help your dog feel safer, more relaxed, and less overwhelmed. Many pet parents are finding success with easy diet changes, calming routines, and natural remedies.

Let's discuss what anxiety looks like in dogs, what causes it, and, most importantly, how you can help your furry friend feel better without harsh chemicals or sedatives.

What Anxiety Looks Like in Dogs

Anxiety can show up in lots of different ways. Some dogs are loud, while others go quiet. But all are trying to tell you something's not right. Common signs include:¹

- Constant barking or whining
- Destructive chewing
- Restlessness or pacing
- Accidents in the house

- Hiding or shaking
- Drooling, yawning, or licking lips
- Changes in appetite

You might notice these signs during thunderstorms, when you leave the house, or when your dog is around new people or places. Some dogs even get nervous when routines change, like during the Fourth of July and other holidays (where there's plenty of fireworks), or when you travel or move to a new home.

Sometimes it sneaks up on you. A friendly pup suddenly refuses to go into certain rooms or becomes clingy at night. These subtle changes can be just as important as the obvious ones. Paying attention early on helps you prevent long-term stress and develop a better bond with your dog.

Anxiety Isn't Just 'Behavioral' — It's Also Physical

When your dog shows signs of anxiety, it's easy to assume it's just a behavior problem. But there's more going on beneath the surface. Anxiety in pets is also rooted in their physiology, particularly in their stress-response system. At the heart of this system is something called the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis — this is a team composed of three parts:²

1. **The hypothalamus (a brain region)** senses danger and alerts the pituitary gland.
2. **The pituitary gland** tells the adrenal glands to release cortisol.
3. **Cortisol**, the primary stress hormone, helps your dog get ready to respond.

However, if the stress doesn't go away, cortisol levels stay high for too long. And that's where the problems begin. When the HPA axis is constantly triggered, it can:

- Drain calming minerals like magnesium and calcium
- Mess with digestion and the immune system
- Make your dog more sensitive to future stress
- Disturb the gut microbiome
- Lower emotional resilience and make fear responses stronger

Another key player is glutamate, a neurotransmitter (brain chemical) that acts like a gas pedal. It revs things up and stimulates the HPA axis. When there's too much glutamate, your dog gets stuck in "high alert mode," reacting to even small changes with fear or nervousness.

Thankfully, your dog also has a built-in balance system, known as the endocannabinoid system (ECS). Think of it as a built-in reset button that helps reduce fear, calm inflammation, and ease the effects of trauma. You can support this system with proper nutrition, calming herbs, and supplements, such as CBD oil.

All of this points to one crucial truth: calming your dog's anxiety requires supporting their entire body, including their brain, gut, hormones, and emotional environment. In fact, researchers have found that over 70% of dogs show anxiety-related behaviors, and for many of them, the root cause is physical, not just emotional.

The Gut-Brain Connection — Why Digestion Matters

Here's something surprising: most of your dog's "feel-good" brain chemicals are made in the gut. If your dog's gut isn't functioning correctly, their brain may not receive the calming signals it needs. As a result, they can become nervous, fearful, or overly reactive. One easy way to support gut health is with bone broth. It's rich in nutrients like collagen and glycine, which help heal the gut and calm the nervous system.

Another great option is kefir water, a probiotic-rich drink that helps balance your dog's gut bacteria and reduce stress. Just a teaspoon a day can make a difference for small dogs (a tablespoon for larger ones).³

Even simple changes, such as adopting a fresh, whole-food diet, can help reduce anxiety. Processed pet foods are often full of additives that can upset your dog's stomach and mood. Choosing food rich in tryptophan, zinc, and omega-3s creates a solid foundation for emotional health.⁴

Natural Nutrients That Calm the Nervous System

Just like people, dogs require the proper nutrients to maintain emotional balance. And when they're missing key ones — especially minerals — the nervous system can go into overdrive. Here are a few that make a big difference:⁵

1. **Magnesium** — Known as the "calming mineral," magnesium helps relax muscles and nerves. Without enough of it, dogs can feel edgy and overwhelmed. Pumpkin seeds and chia seeds are good sources.
2. **Omega-3 fatty acids** — Found in krill oil and wild-caught fish, omega-3 fatty acids support brain health and reduce inflammation. This helps your dog stay emotionally steady, especially during stressful times.
3. **Zinc and tryptophan** — Zinc helps regulate stress hormones, and tryptophan is a building block for serotonin. Together, they promote a sense of calm. Try adding turkey and eggs to increase your dog's intake of these nutrients.

Herbs and Supplements That Help Calm Your Dogs

Some people sip chamomile tea to relax, but did you know this herb can help calm your pet's mind, too? There are several calming herbs that you can give to your pet to help them relax, such as:⁶

- **Chamomile and valerian root** work like natural sedatives. While they don't knock your dog out, they can help ease tension and restlessness. Use chamomile tea by brewing a pot, letting it cool, and then pouring a small amount (1 to 2 teaspoons) into your dog's water bowl. As for valerian root, you can try it on your pet in powder or liquid form — just be sure to follow dog-specific dosing. You can also use lavender or chamomile diffusers.
- **Medicinal mushrooms**, such as Reishi, support the nervous system and help your dog adapt to stress. Reishi mushrooms are especially known for their calming effects.
- **Slippery elm is beneficial** for pets experiencing stress-related diarrhea or an upset stomach. It coats the digestive tract and reduces gut inflammation. Mix 1/4 teaspoon for small dogs, 1/2 teaspoon for medium dogs, and one teaspoon for large dogs daily.

Several natural supplements help support anxious dogs without side effects. These include probiotics, which improve gut health and calm the brain by fixing imbalances in your dog’s belly. Look for formulas made for dogs, like spore-based blends.⁷ Another is cannabidiol (CBD) oil, which supports your dog’s endocannabinoid system. It’s helpful for short-term stress (like fireworks or car rides) and for daily emotional balance.⁸

Create a Calm Home Environment

Helping your dog feel safe at home is just as important as providing them with a well-balanced diet. Here’s how to create a peaceful setting:

- **Set up a safe zone** — A cozy crate, bed, or quiet corner with your dog’s favorite toys.
- **Play calming music or white noise** — These work well during storms or when you’re away.
- **Stick to a routine** — Dogs thrive on consistency, so keep walks, meals, and bedtimes on schedule.
- **Avoid loud noises, yelling, or punishment** — Instead, reward calm behavior with treats, praise, or extra cuddles.

When to Get Extra Help

Helping your dog with anxiety isn’t about fixing them, but about understanding them. It means listening when they can’t use words and supporting their body and mind with patience and love. Choosing natural, gentle solutions will not only ease their anxiety but also build a deeper bond rooted in trust and care. Whether you start with a calming tea, a fresh food upgrade, or simply more quiet time together, every small step matters.

If your dog’s anxiety is severe, consider talking to your vet. There could be a deeper health issue at play. Remember, your dog looks to you for comfort and reassurance. With the right tools, you can give them the peace they deserve — and a life that feels safe, calm, and joyfully theirs.

Sources and References

^{1,4,7} [Dr. Ruth Roberts, April 16, 2025](#)
^{2,8} [The Natural Pet Doctor, May 12, 2025](#)
^{3,5,6} [Boil and Broth, Natural Ways to Manage Anxiety in Dogs](#)
