

Is Your Dog an Optimist or Pessimist? A Simple Way to Tell

How does your dog see the world — does he have a positive or negative outlook on life? These Australian researchers devised a study to find out, and discovered how dogs act when they are pessimists. How to tell if your pet is an optimist or pessimist, and what that means for their happiness.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Studies suggest that like humans, some dogs tend to be optimists, while others have a more pessimistic view of the world
- Researchers believe pessimistic dogs aren't unhappy, they just prefer a predictable routine and require encouragement to try new things
- Dogs with separation anxiety may be pessimists
- A dog's early experiences have a significant impact on his outlook on life
- If your canine companion has separation anxiety or other undesirable behaviors, odds are something happened (or didn't happen) to create and reinforce it

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 26, 2016.

Does your dog seem a little blue at times, almost as though he's depressed? Have you ever wondered if he sees the glass as half empty or has a bit of a negative outlook on life?

The good news is you're not imagining things (which is also the bad news). Some dogs do seem less happy than others, which can be worrisome to a loving guardian who works hard to give his or her canine companion all the best in life.

Are Dogs Either Optimists or Pessimists?

In a study published in 2014, scientists in Australia explored judgment bias in dogs to learn whether they possess individual inclinations toward either an optimistic or pessimistic view of the world.¹

The assumption the researchers set out to explore was that animals who show heightened expectation of positive outcomes are optimistic, while those who are more inclined to expect negative outcomes are pessimistic.

The study involved 40 dogs of different breeds and ages. The researchers played two tones for the dogs that were two octaves apart. The dogs learned that if they touched a target when one of the tones played, they would get yummy milk. If they touched the target in response to the other sound, they got plain old water.

The dogs learned the correct response to hearing the water tone was to not touch the target.

Some Dogs May Be 'Extreme Optimists'

Once the dogs learned to distinguish between the two tones, the researchers played new tones that fell between the two octaves.

Some of the dogs touched the target over and over again when they heard the new tones. The scientists labeled them optimists because they remained hopeful that the ambiguous tones would deliver a reward. The dogs who responded to the new tone that resembled the water tone more than the milk tone were considered extreme optimists.

However, some of the dogs grew anxious when the new tones didn't produce a milk reward, and quickly gave up. The researchers labeled these dogs pessimists.

Lead study author Dr. Melissa Starling of the University of Sydney observed that the pessimistic dogs seemed much more stressed by failing a task than the optimistic dogs. The canine pessimists "... would whine and pace and avoid repeating the task," reported Starling, "while the optimistic dogs would appear unfazed and continue."²

Starling and her team determined that pessimistic dogs aren't necessarily unhappy, they're just more comfortable with a predictable routine and need encouragement to try new things.

In the group of 40 dogs, the researchers found there were more optimists than pessimists.

According to Starling, this research may be invaluable in addressing how animal welfare is assessed. Knowing how optimistic or pessimistic an animal normally is means we can track changes to determine when there are significant variations in emotional state.

"The remarkable power of this is the opportunity to essentially ask a dog 'How are you feeling?' and get an answer," says Starling.

"It could be used to monitor their welfare in any environment, to assess how effective enrichment activities might be in improving welfare, and pinpoint exactly what a dog finds emotionally distressing."

Dogs with Separation Anxiety May Be Pessimists

In another study of 24 dogs, researchers set out to determine if dogs with separation-related behaviors have underlying mood disorders which also affect other aspects of their conduct.³

The researchers isolated the dogs and observed their reaction to being left alone. Many barked, jumped on furniture, and scratched at the door.

Next, the researchers placed bowls in two rooms. One bowl held food and the other was empty. After demonstrating to the dogs that sometimes the bowls were empty and sometimes they were full, the researchers began placing the bowls in ambiguous locations.

According to lead study author professor Mike Mendl of the University of Bristol in the U.K.:

“Dogs that ran fast to these ambiguous locations, as if expecting the positive food reward, were classed as making relatively 'optimistic' decisions. Interestingly, these dogs tended to be the ones who also showed least anxiety-like behavior when left alone for a short time.”⁴

The researchers concluded the more separation anxiety a dog displays when left alone by his owner, the more likely it is he suffers from an underlying, generally negative mood.

“We know that people's emotional states affect their judgments and that happy people are more likely to judge an ambiguous situation positively,” said Mendl.

“What our study has shown is that this applies similarly to dogs — that a 'glass-half-full' dog is less likely to be anxious when left alone than one with a more 'pessimistic' nature.”

These results could prove valuable in understanding how to better help dogs with behavior problems as a way not only to improve their quality of life, but also to reduce the number of troubled canines relinquished to shelters.

Is Nature or Nurture to Blame for a Dog’s Pessimism?

Emily Blackwell, an animal behaviorist at the University of Bristol and study co-author, believes that dogs with separation anxiety misbehave because they didn’t learn as puppies that being alone isn’t scary.

“The process of training a dog to know how to behave, called socialization, is best done during puppyhood,” Blackwell said. Proper training of an adult dog can extinguish bad behavior, but it’s a lot more work and effort to train an older pet.⁵

There is almost always a reason for a dog’s inappropriate behavior or inability to adapt to certain situations. Sometimes we never learn what the reason is, especially with a pet that comes into our life as an adult dog.

But if your canine companion has separation anxiety or other undesirable behaviors, odds are something happened (or didn’t happen) to create and reinforce it.

Everyone who has, is currently, or will ever open their heart and home to a rescue or shelter dog should visit **[A Sound Beginning](#)** and take a look at the program. It’s the perfect way to give a newly rescued pet the best opportunity to come into your life feeling calm and relaxed.

Sources and References

[The Bark](#) October 8, 2015 (Archived).

¹ [PLoS ONE](#), September 17, 2014

² [Science Daily](#) September 18, 2014

³ [Current Biology](#), Vol. 20, Iss. 19, pR839-R840, 12 October 2010

⁴ [The Independent](#) October 12, 2010

⁵ [Bloomberg Business](#), October 11, 2010
