



Handout: Recognising Different Animal Behavioural States

Recognising the behavioural states of animals is essential for ensuring their well-being. Animals communicate their feelings through facial expressions, body postures, movements, vocalisations, and their position within their enclosure or in relation to humans. This handout outlines how to identify various behavioural states, including signs of relaxation, fear, aggression, and stress, as well as abnormal behaviours related to stress and illness.

Main Indicators of Animal Behavioural States

1. Body Posture

- **Ears:** Position can indicate alertness, aggression, or relaxation. For example, forward ears in dogs can indicate interest or aggression, while flattened ears suggest fear or submission.
- **Eyes:** Wide, staring eyes may indicate fear or aggression, while soft, blinking eyes often show contentment.
- **Tail:** A high, wagging tail in dogs can show excitement or aggression, while a tucked tail indicates fear.
- **Head Position:** A raised head can signify alertness or dominance, while a lowered head often shows submission or fear.
- **Mouth and Facial Expressions:** Bared teeth can indicate aggression, while a relaxed, open mouth usually shows contentment.



2. Movement

- **Relaxed Movement:** Smooth, flowing movements indicate a relaxed state.
- **Tense Movement:** Stiff, jerky movements can indicate stress, fear, or aggression.
- **Pacing or Repetitive Movements:** Often signs of stress or boredom in captivity.

3. Vocalisation

- **Contentment:** Soft sounds like purring in cats or gentle cooing in birds.
- **Fear:** High-pitched or rapid vocalisations, such as yelping in dogs or screeching in birds.
- **Aggression:** Growling, barking, hissing, or other loud, harsh sounds.

4. Body Position Within Enclosure

- **Hiding:** Staying in a secluded area can indicate fear or illness.
- **Exploring:** Actively moving around the enclosure suggests curiosity and contentment.
- **Staying Close to the Front:** May indicate anticipation or desire for interaction.

5. Body Position in Relation to Humans

- **Approaching:** Indicates curiosity or friendliness.
- **Retreating:** Shows fear or discomfort.
- **Standing Sideways:** Can be a neutral or defensive posture.



Examples Specific to Selected Species

Dogs

- **Relaxation/Contentment:** Relaxed body, wagging tail, soft eyes, relaxed ears.
- **Fear:** Tail tucked, ears back, wide eyes, cowering posture.
- **Aggression:** Stiff body, forward stance, growling, bared teeth, direct eye contact.
- **Stress:** Pacing, excessive barking, licking lips.

Cats

- **Relaxation/Contentment:** Purring, relaxed body, half-closed eyes, tail up or curled.
- **Fear:** Hiding, flattened ears, wide eyes, crouched body.
- **Aggression:** Hissing, arched back, tail puffed, direct stare.
- **Stress:** Over-grooming, hiding, decreased appetite.

Birds

- **Relaxation/Contentment:** Fluffed feathers, singing, gentle cooing, active.
- **Fear:** Flattened feathers, wide eyes, rapid breathing, trying to escape.
- **Aggression:** Biting, screeching, wings spread.
- **Stress:** Feather plucking, pacing, decreased vocalisation.

Abnormal and Stress-Related Behaviours

1. Stereotypic Behaviour

- **Pacing:** Common in large predators like big cats.
- **Bar Biting:** Seen in rodents and primates.
- **Tail Chasing:** Often observed in dogs.



2. Appetite Changes

- **Decreased Appetite:** Can indicate stress, illness, or fear.
- **Increased Appetite:** May be a sign of anxiety or metabolic issues.

3. Behavioural Changes

- **Increased Aggression:** Often a response to stress, fear, or illness.
- **Lethargy:** Can indicate depression, illness, or stress.

4. Illness

- **Signs of Illness:** Lethargy, changes in eating or drinking habits, abnormal posture, and unusual vocalisations.

Recognising the behavioural states of animals through their body posture, movements, vocalisations, and positioning is crucial for their care and well-being. By understanding these signs, caregivers can address the animals' needs and ensure a healthy, stress-free environment.