

Stress in pet dogs

change what you can,
and help your dog cope with the rest

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“Slow down, and savor. Modern life is exhausting!”¹

Ain't that the truth! The way most of us are doing it, modern life is stressful in all sorts of ways – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

That's also true for our animals. They, too, experience all sorts of stresses, often precipitated by *us*, the people who love them.

Chief among the stresses pet dogs may experience is social isolation when we head off to work or play without them. And even when we're home, we're so often busy or distracted or exhausted that we're not fully 'there' when we *are* there. That's stressful for our dogs. It can be confusing and lonely for them, and it may result in all kinds of behaviors we find undesirable or downright unacceptable.

Other worrisome things our dogs may experience include stressful social interactions with other dogs, travel (for those who don't love the car), grooming, training, boarding, the postman, the delivery driver, other unfamiliar people and animals – and, it must be said, the vet!

And then there are the dogs who are genetically predisposed to being a 'highly sensitive dog' (HSD), which is the canine equivalent of the highly sensitive person (HSP).² All sorts of things worry and stress these wonderful dogs, these canine 'canaries in the coal mine' of our modern lives.

What can we do for our dogs?

What can we do to alleviate the stress our dogs may be experiencing, whether occasional, persistent, or recurrent?

In addition to positive training, it's important for us to change what we can in our home and work lives to better accommodate our dogs' needs and life stories. But that's not always easy; and despite our best intentions, it may not be possible or it may not be enough.

Here is where ‘adaptogens’ shine. Adaptogens are natural or synthetic substances that help us *cope* in the short-term and *adapt* in the long-term to whatever stress we may be under. Of the natural adaptogens is a small group of herbs that have adapted to some fairly inhospitable environments, such as high latitudes or altitudes.

The plant substances (phytochemicals) that are of most use to us as adaptogens are those that the plant has devised over the millennia for its own protection (coping) and adaptation. It’s one of the neat economies of Mother Nature that these phytochemicals can do for us and our dogs what they do for the plant: they help us *cope* with immediate threats (real or imagined) and *adapt* over time so that our capacity to cope is expanded, making us less prone to being (or feeling) overwhelmed.

Adaptogenic herbs

Among my favorite adaptogenic herbs are these:

- Siberian ginseng (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*)
- ginseng (*Panax* species); the various Asian and American ginsengs are all good, as is the close relative *Echinopanax/Oplopanax* sp.
- rhodiola (*Rhodiola rosea*)
- schizandra (*Schisandra chinensis*)
- aralia (*Aralia elata/mandschurica*), aka Manchurian thorn
- maral root (*Rhaponticum/Leuzea carthamoides*)

I’ve written two in-depth articles on the use of adaptogens in dogs: one on working dogs³ and the other on senior dogs.⁴ They detail the physical and psychological benefits of these herbs, so I won’t repeat myself here.

What I want to do instead is discuss the ‘energetics’, for want of a better word, of some of these herbs as I’ve come to know them in my holistic veterinary practice. When I made water-based solutions or ‘essences’ of these herbs and tested them on myself, it gave me a much greater perspective on these adaptogens than I’d gained simply from reading the scientific literature on the individual herbs.

I’m a lifelong science nerd, so I love reading scientific studies. But as I played with these herbs in essence form, I quickly came to realize the truth in the maxim, “Not everything that can be counted counts; and not everything that counts can be counted.”

Following are some of the notes I took during that process. These notes are included in a book I’ve been meaning to finish for years, titled *Little Book of Plant Secrets – notes from working with medicinal herbs in essence form*.

Siberian ginseng (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*)

Here is a herb whose properties I thought I understood well, only to learn that I've been operating under a very limited view of this wonderful plant. "Science has mistaken my gifts by limiting my 'actions' to the things it can measure," it said. Ah; how many times have we made that mistake!

In fact, I'm struck by the difference between what I thought I knew of this plant from reading scientific material about it and what I learned from the plant itself through this essence. The difference is like day and night; harshness *vs.* gentleness, force *vs.* Power. How often have we misunderstood ourselves, others, and Life itself in this misdirected way?

Anyway, on to the essence of *Eleuthero*, as it's often called. It speaks of core strength; resilience, fortitude, tolerance; the ability to stand firm, calm, and confident even in less-than-ideal conditions. I felt a broad column of strength running up through my midsection when I took this essence.

At the same time, there is a delicacy — or better put, a subtlety — to *Eleuthero*; a quiet strength, rather than a showy or combative stance. So, it's more about the ability to endure with quiet confidence and good grace in difficult circumstances. This plant has a fortitude and robustness that belies its apparent delicateness.

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and good grace in difficult circumstances.

Eleuthero would thus be wonderful for "delicate" or sensitive animals who need some help coping with their troublesome situation. It would help them realize the ability to not only survive, but to *thrive*; to adapt and to find themselves at home wherever they are.

The 'vibe' of this particular herb epitomizes the fundamental nature and power of the adaptogens: Make changes where changes are needed; but when no more is possible, this herb helps the animal endure with good grace.

But I must caution not to use *Eleuthero*, nor any of the adaptogens, in place of making whatever changes are needed for your dog's health and well-being (*and yours*). It is *not a substitute* for right action, fair treatment, and compassionate care. Do your best to change what you can; and when no more can be done, try one or more of these herbs. (They work brilliantly in combination.)

'Energetically' (*ughh*; the poverty of the English language wrt this aspect of life), *Eleuthero* did a couple more wonderful things: it made me feel full of light — a beautiful, expansive feeling that gently energized my tired, collapsed, junk-filled 'energetics'. It also made my heart beat stronger, calmer, happier, abler. (*Eleuthero* is a great cardiac tonic for animals needing some cardiac support.)

The last note I wrote about *Eleuthero* sums it up perfectly: it makes the flame burn brighter.

Ginseng (*Panax species*)

In this instance, I used American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*).

I found *ginseng* to be centering and balancing, for want of any better terms. It made me feel deeply joyful and peaceful. It also felt earthy and grounding, being very nourishing and heart-warming. (In my clinical experience, it too is a good tonic for the heart.)

My impression of *ginseng* is that it is comforting, calming, relaxing, yet at the same time enlivening and revivifying, in that there was a *vibrancy* to the still-point to which it returned me. (The phrase I now use to describe this vibrant still-point is 'lively peace'. There is a lively peace to the quality of being that *ginseng* inspires.)

The most interesting thing to me, though, addressed its traditional use as a tonic herb that promotes longevity. My revised take on *ginseng* is that it allows one to *savor* life again. It's not so much for longevity, but rather for *quality* of life, of quality more so than quantity. The funny thing is that when life is savored, it tends to last longer as well!

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There was a quiet mirth to the *ginseng* essence; more of a chuckle than a belly laugh. As with many medicinal herbs that use the root portion of the plant, *ginseng* is one of the hidden jokes of the plant world – treasure buried underground.

Rhodiola (*Rhodiola rosea*)

I love this herb! The *rhodiola* essence felt like joy in a bottle! Not only did it speak of surviving, hanging on, coping with harsh or intolerable conditions with good grace, there was a sweetness and beauty to its perseverance.

Rhodiola is wonderful for chronically stressed animals or those dealing with stressful situations such as traveling, showing, or boarding. It's particularly good for performance anxiety in show animals. (*Rhodiola* is one of the small but essential components of a powdered blend I created for horses with stomach ulcers, a very common problem in performance horses.)

I take *rhodiola* myself when stressed. It simply helps me cope. It doesn't cause euphoria, drowsiness, or any other altered state. It just takes some of the *drama* out of the situation, allowing me to feel that "Oh, yeah, I can cope with this."

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allowing me to feel that I can cope.

The *rhodiola* essence made me smile, feel good, blissful. At the same time, my feet were planted firmly on the ground; rooted in the earth, in fact. This simple, unassuming plant has great power.

Schizandra (*Schisandra chinensis*)

WooHOOooo!! *Schizandra* is exhilarating, energizing, laugh-out-loud then keep-on-chuckling good! This one is *fun!!* Enlivening, activating, stimulating, it improves circulation to sluggish areas. It revs up cellular functions, gets everyone back on-line.

Schizandra encourages efficient use of energy, so it delays the onset of fatigue when working, whether with body or mind. It facilitates all physical and mental processes, without hurry or frenetic activity, which is inefficient and often unproductive.

Schizandra is a sheer delight, and a great herb to use in performance animals, especially toward the end of the day, the event, or the show season.

My main take-away from this essence was this: Rest when you need to rest, but consider *schizandra* if you have to keep going for a little longer before you can stop.

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Well, there you have it. I hope this short article has whetted your appetite for this amazing little family of herbs. They are Mother Nature's Secret Recipe for helping us cope with life's challenges so that we can not only survive, but *thrive*. After all, we really are meant to enjoy our lives.

References

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