



Helping Your Fearful Dog

Dogs may display a variety of behaviors when they are afraid. A frightened dog may try to escape, may show submissive behaviors (avoidance of eye contact, submissive urinating, rolling over to expose his belly), or he may freeze and remain immobile. Some dogs will bark and/or growl at the object that is causing their fear. In extreme cases of fearfulness a dog may be destructive (out of general anxiety or in an attempt to escape), he may lose control of his bladder or bowels, or air snap or bite. A fearful dog will almost always display certain body language, including lowering his head, flattening his ears back against his head, and tucking his tail between his legs. He may also pant, salivate, tremble and/or pace.

First

It's important to remember that a dog that is genetically predisposed to general fearfulness, or a dog that was improperly socialized during a critical stage in his development, may not respond as quickly to treatment as a dog that has developed a specific fear in response to a specific experience. It is essential, however, to first rule out any medical causes for your dog's fearful behavior. Your first step should be to take your dog to your veterinarian for a thorough medical evaluation.

What You Can Do

Most fears will not go away by themselves, and if left untreated, may get worse. Some fears, when treated, will decrease in intensity or frequency but may not disappear entirely. Once medical reasons have been ruled out, the first step in dealing with your dog's fearful behavior is to identify what triggers his fear. Is it a loud noise? A weird sound? New people? Most fears can be treated using desensitization and counter conditioning techniques, which do require a good amount of time and patience. You may need help from a certified dog trainer or dog behavior consultant to help you with these techniques.

Desensitization and Counter Conditioning

- Begin by exposing your dog to a very low level or small amount of whatever it is that is causing his fear. For example, if he is afraid of bicycles, start with a bicycle placed at a distance of 100 feet from your dog.
- Reward him when he sees the bicycle. Repeat this multiple times until your dog can look at the bicycle and remain calm (or even seem excited!). Over time, gradually move the bicycle closer to him. As long as your dog remains relaxed or curious, reward him with treats and praise. If at any point he becomes anxious or fearful, move the bicycle further away and proceed at a slower pace.

- When your dog can remain relaxed in the presence of a stationary bicycle, move the bicycle 100 feet away again, but have someone ride it slowly by him. Again, gradually increase the proximity of the slowly moving bicycle, rewarding your dog for remaining calm and relaxed. Repeat this procedure as many times as necessary, gradually increasing the speed of the moving bicycle.
- This process may take several days, weeks, or even months. You must proceed at a slow enough pace that your dog never becomes fearful during the process. Additionally, whatever causes the dog's fearful reaction must be limited or (preferably) completely removed from his environment during times that you are not working on treatment. So in this example, you should avoid all bicycles while out with your dog. If you do see a bicycle, remember to reward with treats and move away quickly.

Realistic Expectations

Some of the things that frighten dogs can be difficult to reproduce and/or control. For example, if your dog is afraid of thunderstorms, he may be responding to other things that occur during the storm, such as smells, barometric pressure changes, and/or changes in the light. During the desensitization process it is impossible for you to reproduce all of these factors. If your dog is afraid of men, you may work at desensitizing him, but if an adult man lives in your household and your dog is constantly exposed to him, this can disrupt the gradual process of desensitization.

When to Get Help

Because desensitization and counter conditioning can be difficult to do, and because behavior problems may increase if these techniques are done incorrectly, you may want to get professional, in-home help from a certified dog trainer or behavior consultant. It is important to keep in mind that a fearful dog that feels trapped or is pushed too far may display behaviors like growling, air snapping, or biting. If your dog displays these behaviors, stop all behavior modification procedures and seek professional help from a certified professional as soon as possible.

It's important to remember that these behaviors are fear-based and should not be punished. In order to stop your dog from growling, snapping, or biting again, you must change their emotional response to what is scaring them. Punishing the growling, air snapping, or biting will only increase your dog's fear, likely increasing the likelihood that your dog will bite again.

Consult With Your Veterinarian

Medication may be available that can help your dog feel less anxious for short time periods. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your dog. Do not attempt to give your dog any over-the-counter or

prescription medication without consulting with your veterinarian. Animals do not respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for humans could be fatal to your dog. Drug therapy alone will not reduce fears and phobias permanently. In extreme cases, behavior modification and medication used together may be the best approach.

What Not To Do

- Do not punish your dog for being afraid. Punishment will only make him more fearful.
- Do not try to force your dog to experience the object or situation that is causing him to be afraid. For example, if he is afraid of bicycles and you force him to stand in place while bicycles whiz by, he will probably become more fearful, rather than less fearful of bicycles.
- Never punish your dog after the fact for destruction or house-soiling caused by anxiety or fear. This behavior is the result of panic, not disobedience or spite. Punishment will do more harm than good.