

Your Dog's Fear

DOES YOUR DOG HAVE FEARS?

Fear in a dog may present in a variety of ways. Recognizing that your dog is indeed fearful is the first step. Some signs that a fearful dog may display include: tucking its tail between its legs, lowering its head, shaking or trembling, lip licking, rolling over to expose the belly, urinating, or becoming immobilized. A scared or frightened dog may also display aggression, including barking or growling, if it feels it cannot escape what is feared. Avoidance behaviors such as running away, hiding or backing up into a corner may also be seen.

WHY IS MY DOG FEARFUL?

Many dogs are fearful of specific stimuli or situations. These fears may stem from a lack of exposure to the stimulus, or may develop due to an adverse experience. Both can result in the dog having a fearful, emotional reaction when confronted with the stimulus. Often dogs respond fearfully to things in their environment that in nature would be potentially dangerous, such as loud noises or strangers. This behavior can be troubling for owners to watch. Often, owners become concerned that they have done something to make their dog fearful and their natural reaction is to try to comfort the dog which may amplify these behaviors.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOUR DOG?

1. Identify specific triggers

This is an important step in moving forward and helping your pet overcome their fear. Knowing what stimuli are a “triggers” is key in creating a treatment plan because it allows you to have more control over the behavior and avoid such stimuli when possible.

2. Avoid the stimulus

Initially it is often best to avoid the things that will trigger a fearful reaction. This may provide an opportunity to work on your relationship with your pet and develop trust without distraction.

3. Define your relationship with your pet

How do you and your family members react to the behavior? Often times the natural reaction to the fearful pet is to comfort them by petting or picking up small dogs. This response may enhance the dog's reaction to the fearful stimulus because they perceive the comfort as positive reinforcement of their fearful behavior. Rather, a more appropriate reaction is to act as though nothing unusual is going on and try to redirect the dog's attention to you through a “look” or “sit” command and then treating that behavior. Some dogs are so fearful they may not be food motivated. Perhaps there is something else that your dog considers a “treat”. You may use this in the place of food. In these cases it is essential that all family members are consistent and treat the dog in the same manor.

4. Practice leadership exercises

This is a concept widely used by many behaviorists and veterinarians as a method to create a solid, stable foundation for interactions with pets. In dogs, this means that food or treats (and in some cases general affection) are to be given when the dog performs a behavior for the owner. This can be a simple sit or a chain of behaviors, and serves to strengthen the relationship through a pattern of predictable interactions. Having this relationship will help your dog look to you in times of stress or fear as a stable source of support without an emotional dependency which can perpetuate fearful behaviors.

5. Desensitize and countercondition

Desensitization and counter conditioning is generally recommended for situations involving fear but must be done very slowly and gradually. The goal of this approach is that your dog not only becomes desensitized to the adverse stimulus but forms a positive association with it. In order for this to be successful it is imperative that the trigger has been identified and the relationship between the dog and owner is stable. A great way to better understand and use this training appropriately would be to contact your veterinarian for assistance.

SOME THINGS TO NOT DO:

- 1) Do not move too quickly! Be patient and supportive.
- 2) Do not punish the dog—this may enhance their negative association with the fearful stimulus.
- 3) Do not flood the dog with the stimulus! By exposing your dog to the full stimulus, you can make the fear worse.

These are general recommendations for fearful dogs. Please contact your veterinarian for more information on treating specific behavioral problems and/or available medications.

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www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vmth/small_animal/behavior

