

The Fearful Dog

Dogs may display a variety of behaviors when they're afraid. A fearful dog will display certain body postures, including lowering his/her head, flattening his/her ears back against his/her head, and tucking his/her tail between his/her legs. He/She may also pant, salivate, tremble and/or pace. 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/she 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), or he/she may lose control of his bladder or bowels and, therefore, house soil.

Causes Of Fearful Behavior

First make a list of all the stimuli that might incite fear or anxiety. Stimuli may be visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and on rare occasions associated with taste. There may be multiple stimuli to which you will have to desensitize and counter condition. For example, a dog that shows a fear response to children on bicycles past the home may show anxiety related to the bicycles, the children, the actions, the sounds, the locations and the owners response.

Once each stimulus is identified, a means of controlling the stimuli along a gradient of increasingly stronger stimuli must be developed. A gradient can be designed using distance (from far enough away to cause minimal response and gradually closer), activity level (from no movement to high activity), or location (from most calm and controllable location to most difficult or distracted), and with different handlers (from trainer to family member with least control).

It is a common misconception that dogs who are afraid of men were all abused by a man at some point. Some dogs are afraid of children as well, but it doesn't mean they were abused by a child. More than likely, these dogs were not well socialized as puppies and are therefore shy or fearful around people, new places, or other new things.

What You Can Do

You're Ok, I'm ok. Your dog is very aware of your emotions. So if you are worried that your dog will be afraid, both of you are fearful and your dog knows this. Your dog will assume you fear the same things that he/she fears, not that you are just worried about him/her. So be confident, keep your voice calm and add some laughter. Be relaxed and calm, don't worry. Tell your dog everything is fine with confidence.

Most fears won't 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. Most fears can be treated using desensitization and counter conditioning techniques, which require a lot of time and patience. You may need help from a professional animal behavior specialist to help you with these techniques.

Desensitization

Begin by exposing your dog to a very low level or small amount of whatever it is that's causing his/her fear. For example, if he/she is afraid of bicycles, start with a bicycle placed at a distance of 100 feet from your dog. Reward him/her for calm, non-fearful behavior in the presence of the bicycle. Gradually move the bicycle closer to him/her. As long as your dog remains relaxed, reward him/her with treats and praise. If at any point he/she becomes anxious, 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/her. 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 desensitization process.

Counter Conditioning

Counter conditioning works best when used along with desensitization and involves pairing the fear stimulus with an activity or behavior incompatible with the fear behavior. Using the desensitization technique example described previously, while your dog is exposed to the bicycle, ask him/her to perform some obedience exercises, such as "sit" and "down." Reward him/her for obeying and continue to have him/her obey commands as the bicycle is moved closer to him/her.

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/she 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's impossible for you to reproduce all of these factors.