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Fears and Phobias in Dogs – Animals and People

For more information, also see our introductory handout on 'Fears, Phobias and Anxiety'.

Why is my dog afraid of people and/or other animals?

There are many reasons that dogs can develop a fear of people or the other animals. Firstly, there may have been limited or minimal exposure to people and/or other animals when the dog was young. Socialization is an important aspect of raising a puppy. Without adequate, constant and positive interactions with people and other animals, dogs may develop fears. In fact, fears may be very specific so that a dog that has been adequately socialized to a particular "type" of person such as adult males may show fear toward children, men, women, teenagers, or people of other races. Similarly, dogs that are well socialized to other dogs may show fear toward other animals.

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Secondly, dogs are impressionable and through the effect of "one trial learning" may take one experience that was intense or traumatic and generalize to many similar situations. This can occur, for example, with a bad experience with a small child, which then makes the dog fearful of all small children, or from a fight and subsequent injury caused by another dog. Sometimes a number of unpleasant events "paired" or associated with a person or animal can lead to increasing fear. For example, if a pet is punished (especially with a painful device such as a pinch or shock collar) when it is exposed to a person or other animal, it may begin to pair the stimulus (the person or other animal) with the unpleasant consequence (punishment). This is especially true with the use of a painful device such as a pinch or shock collar.

Over the first few years of a pet's life, there are a number of developmental stages when fears might arise. Although rare, some pets, perhaps those with a strong genetic component or those that have had a poor start to life (e.g. lacking good maternal effects) may begin to show fear as early as two months of age. Fear might more commonly begin to arise as the primary sensitive period for socialization begins to end and fear begins to take precedence at three to four months of age. On the other hand, some pets may not begin to display fear until they approach sexual maturity (six to 12 months of age) or even behavioral maturity at 18 months to three years of age. These fears may slowly progress in intensity over the years, or may suddenly seem to intensify, especially if there has been a particularly unpleasant experience. However, fears that begin to emerge well into the adult or senior years, might be related to medical problems that lead to painful conditions, altered mentation as might be associated with diseases that affect neurological function, declining senses, endocrine imbalances or cognitive dysfunction.



Can I prevent fears from developing?



As mentioned above, socialization is the cornerstone to raising a dog that is comfortable with people. Early, frequent and pleasant encounters with people of all ages and types can help prevent fears later. This exposure should begin before 3 months of age and continue throughout the first year. In addition, the dog should be exposed to as many different environments, sights and sounds as possible so that they become accustomed early, before fears emerge. For details see our handout on 'Puppy – Socialization and Fear Prevention'.

What signs might my dog show when she is afraid?

Dogs that are frightened may display aggression or may attempt to avoid (flee). Fidgeting and freezing are two other possible fear responses. When attempting to avoid a threat (or a perceived threat), a dog may cower, look away, tuck its tail and perhaps tremble or pant. At other times the signs may be subtler. A dog may only duck its head and look away, and tolerate petting at first, but then snap. It is important to watch your dog for signs of uneasiness such as backing up, hiding behind you and licking of the lips. When the signs above are combined with raised hairs on the back (hackles), growling and snarling this may be fear related aggression. Naturally growling or snarling would indicate aggression, but may also indicate fear. (See our handout on 'Fears, Phobias and Anxiety').

What can I do if my pet begins to show fear or begins to panic?

When interacting with a pet that is exhibiting fear and anxiety, there are two critical issues that first need to be addressed. First, if there is the potential for danger or injury to the dog or others, then safety is an overriding concern (Canine aggression is discussed specifically in a number of our other handouts). Your response to the pet is the second important factor since any anxiety, threats or punishment (which might be understandable if you are worried or frustrated) are counterproductive because they will further aggravate the pet's fear and anxiety. Therefore, to achieve the desired outcome, you will need to control and train your dog with techniques that calm and settle. Before getting started please review our handouts on settle exercises, handling exercises, and behavior modification. If you find yourself in a situation where your pet is very anxious or fearful and cannot be settled, the best response is to calmly and quickly leave the situation.

What information do I need to identify and treat my fearful pet?

Usually a behavioral consultation is needed for dogs that are showing extreme fears and/or aggression. If the fears are mild, then owner intervention may help to improve the problem or at the very least prevent them from progressing. First, it is important to identify all fearful stimuli. This is not always easy and needs to be very exact. What persons or animals is the dog afraid of and where does the fearful behavior occur? Often there are certain situations, people, and places that provoke the behavior more than others.



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For treatment to be most successful, it is important to be able to place the fearful stimuli along a gradient from low to high. In other words, you want to identify those situations, people, places and animals that are likely to cause minimal fear as well as those situations, people, places and animals that are most likely to cause the fearful behaviors. See our handout on 'Behavior Modification – Implementing Desensitization and Counterconditioning' for more information on creating a stimulus and reward gradient.

Next, you need to examine what factors are further aggravating the problem. Aggressive displays are a successful way of getting the fearful stimulus to leave and thus also reinforce the behaviors if they are successful. Similarly if the pet escapes from the situation it does not have the opportunity for improvement. The owner's response (fear, anxiety, punishment) or a fearful or threatening stimulus will further increase the pet's fear. Owners that force the pet to confront its fears will usually end up with a more fearful, panicked pet. The owner, the pet and the stimuli must remain calm to achieve success.

After I have identified the stimuli, what do I do next?

Before a behavior modification program can begin, you need to be able to control and communicate with your dog. This will require some training. Often a physical control and safety device such as a head halter might be needed. The head halter provides a means for controlling the head and muzzle, to insure that the dog responds to the given command (sit, quiet, and heel). To make the dog feel more secure by showing the dog that you are calm and in control, orient the dog away from the stimulus, and prevent the dog from either causing injury or escaping. (See 'Training Dogs – Head Halter Training' handout for more details and our handout on 'Training Dogs – Settle and Relaxation Training').

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Next, teach your dog that when it sits and stays it will receive a delicious food reward. The goal of this training is to allow the dog to assume a relaxed and happy body posture and facial expression on command. Once this is established, then food rewards are phased out. For more details, see our handout on 'Training Dogs – Settle and Relaxation Training'. For more information on how to reward your dog, see our handouts on 'Training Dogs – Learn to Earn and Predictable Rewards'; 'Behavior Modification – Working for Food – Dogs and Cats'; and 'Behavior Modification – Reinforcement and Rewards'.

Lastly, begin counterconditioning and desensitization to acclimate the dog to the stimuli that usually cause the fearful response. This needs to be done slowly and cannot begin until your dog can reliably relax on command in the absence of the stimulus. This is where the gradient that you established earlier becomes helpful and can be the most difficult part of the program since it is generally necessary to set up situations where you can control the dog and the stimulus. Therefore, inviting people to the house, or having some neighborhood children ride their bikes back and forth along the street, may be necessary so that you can insure that the stimuli are predictable and well controlled. Start by exposing the dog to very low levels of the stimulus, in fact ones that do not evoke fear. The dog is then rewarded for sitting quietly and calmly. Favored reinforcers should be identified and saved exclusively for pairing with exposure to the stimuli. Gradually, if the dog exhibits no fear, the stimulus intensity is increased (See our handout 'Behavior Modification – Desensitization and Counterconditioning'). It is extremely important that this is done slowly. The goal is to associate a calm, positive outcome with the once fearful stimulus and by insuring a settle response before proceeding to the next level of intensity. If the dog begins to show fear during training, it is progressing too fast and could be making the problem worse. The session might be ended by settling the pet and then using a let's go command, (a previously trained command for leaving situations on a happy note). Always set up the dog to succeed and always end on a positive note. The use of the leash and head collar can greatly improve the chances of success and because of the additional control, will often help the owner to succeed in getting the dogs attention and calming it down; faster than with commands and rewards alone.

But my dog may still encounter the fearful stimulus when we are not in a training exercise. What should I do then?

Each time the dog experiences the fearful stimulus and reacts with fear, the behavior is further aggravated. If possible, it is helpful to try and avoid the fear-producing stimulus. This may mean confining the dog when children visit, or the house is full of strangers. Alternately, walks may need to be curtailed or scheduled at times when encounters with other people and animals can be minimized.

If you do find yourself in a situation where the dog is responding fearfully, do not raise your voice or punish your dog as this will further increase his or her anxiety. If your dog is wearing a head halter it may be possible to reorient the dog so that you can get eye contact and then to pull up and settle the dog so that the dog learns to ignore or accept the approaching stimulus. Another option is to use a "happy" tone of voice and walk just far enough away that the dog can be successfully distracted and settled.

How might these techniques be used in a training situation?

Take the example of fear toward a delivery person. Begin by training the dog to sit and stay quietly throughout the house and then by the window and doorway in the absence of anyone approaching. Use only reward based training techniques along with perhaps a head halter to ensure success. Use clicker training (see our handout on 'Training Products for Dogs - Clicker and Target Training') or a favored reward such as a toy or treat to mark and reward acceptable responses. As the dog begins to anticipate that a favored reward is imminent the dog's attitude or "mood" should be positive rather than anxious and aggressive. The relaxed sit stay and expectation of rewards are incompatible with the behavior you wish to change, in this case lunging at the window at a delivery person. Once the dog learns to quickly settle and anticipate food at each location on command, training with varying forms of the stimulus can begin. It may take days or weeks for the dog to learn how to perform this task reliably on command. During that time, phase out food rewards so that the dog does the task equally well with or without food.

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Next, train the pet to perform the desired behavior in the presence of a variety of stimuli that are similar to the actual problem stimulus (e.g. strangers walking across the property). Using desensitization, the stimulus is presented at a muted or low enough level so that the dog can be kept settled and shows no fear or anxiety. Training could begin by having a family member stand by or walk by the window, and then progress to a stranger at the edge of the property. The owner then practices the training to ensure that a calm settle response is achieved and rewarded. Again favored rewards, toys or clicker training should be used for each new step in the program. The use of a head halter will help to ensure a quick and successful response. Repeat this many times so that the dog does it reliably and gradually have the person move closer to the window until the person can walk by while the dog relaxes or plays and gets its reward. Rewards are faded out once each new level is achieved and reintroduced for each new step along the way. The dog is learning the new acceptable response that earns the reward (response substitution) and is acquiring a positive association with the stimulus. Proceed slowly, so that the dog learns to perform the desired behavior over and over before being challenged with the real thing.

Finally, progress to stimuli that more closely resemble the real life situation. Perhaps have the dog sit by the window when a friend or family member dressed as a delivery person walks by the property and finally progress to sessions with delivery people. Some dogs may progress faster if the training is done outside with stimuli across the street or walking across the property.

Can drugs be helpful?

For pets that are excessively fearful or exhibit extreme panic responses when exposed to the stimuli, then a drug to help the pet maintain a more relaxed state might be helpful. Antidepressants take several weeks to reach effect but may be useful at controlling the severe anxiety states from being expressed. In addition, DAP™ collar (see pheromones handout), melatonin and other natural components might be considered concurrently. For more immediate effect if the pet is likely to become extremely anxious or panic, then benzodiazepines such as alprazolam may be useful.

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However, they have a short duration of effect and there may be a rebound effect as the drug wears off. Anti-anxiety drugs may occasionally lead to an increase in aggression due to disinhibition or paradoxical drug effects. While medication may help the pet in the short term, in some cases the responses are not sustained once the medication is withdrawn. Therefore, if drugs have been effective, gradual dose reduction is suggested.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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