

FEAR

PREVENTING & REDUCING FEAR IN DOGS

RECOGNIZING FEAR

Fear is a normal emotion that engages animals to respond to a threat. Fear prepares the animal for running away or fighting something they perceive as dangerous. Most dogs are accustomed to normal situations such as traffic, household noises, being approached by friendly strangers and many other every day events. Some dogs, however, experience fear over things that are not truly dangerous and that do not put them at risk of injury.

Dogs that are fearful have a difficult time adjusting to new situations and people. As dogs get more fearful they develop behaviours that could include aggression to cope with their fearful emotional state. There are techniques that will build your fearful dog's confidence, which are outlined below.

When dogs are fearful they may:

- Hide
- Run away
- Keep a low posture
- Tremble
- Keep their ears back or flattened
- Lick their muzzle repeatedly
- Have dilated pupils
- Tuck their tail between their legs
- Bark, lunge or growl at a person while backing away

VETERINARY HELP

Dogs that have fearfulness may benefit from Dog Appeasing Pheromones or anti-anxiety drugs. These can be used in conjunction with the behaviour modification program but should only be done in consultation with a veterinarian.

TREATING THE PROBLEM

Gradual exposure

Reducing fear requires gradual exposure to the situation they fear and pairing the scary thing with something the dog loves. (Food is ideal - think steak, chicken or smelly cheese)

Do not force a dog to accept the people, objects or situations he fears. While this may seem efficient because your dog obeys, it will cause him stress, which can make the problem worse.

It is fine to sooth your dog when he is afraid

If it helps your dog sooth, pet or talk to him in a soft, sympathetic voice. This may comfort him. Do not worry this will not be reinforcing his aggressive or fearful behavior. You cannot reinforce fear as it is an emotion. If you are afraid of spiders and were given \$1000 dollars as a reinforcement while you were in a room filled with spiders would this make you more afraid next time? Of course not as emotions cannot be reinforced.

Changing Your Dog's Response to Feared Objects

When your dog is not looking place the feared object (brush, bicycle, nail clipper, etc.) in full view somewhere in the house. Sprinkle the object and surrounding area with treats for your dog to discover on his own time. Once the treats are finished remove the object and repeat in a different location.

Next place the object down in front of your dog. Pause 2 seconds and then feed him treat after treat. Do this until he looks excited when he sees the object.

THE “TOUCH” HAND TARGETING GAME

Hand targeting is a great game to teach fearful dogs. The goal is to get your dog to touch your palm with his nose.

- 1 Start by putting some cheese whiz on your open palm
- 2 Place your palm 5 inches in front of his face. The instant he touches your palm, say “yes” and then feed him a treat
- 3 Next repeat but hold your palm 1 foot away
- 4 Then hold your palm to the right of the dog, then to the left
- 5 Finally say “touch” and while you are 2 or 3 feet away hold your palm out
- 6 Once your dog happily rushes over to touch your palm add movement. Say touch, present your palm and take a few steps so that your dog has to follow you to reach your palm. Make it a fun game.

Take It Outside

Once happily touches your palm in every room indoors begin to play the touch game outdoors. Start when there are no distractions.

The final goal will be for your dog to play the touch game when near the things that he is afraid of. Use very high value food when working outdoors. Only feed this special food when working on his fear.

CHANGING YOUR DOG’S RESPONSE TO FEARED SOUNDS

Some dogs are afraid of various sounds (e.g., thunder, cars, fireworks, sirens, babies crying, etc.) You can attempt to desensitize your dog’s fear of these sounds by recording the feared sounds or you can purchase a sound effect CD at a music store or on the Internet. Play the sounds at a very low level (keep in mind, your dog has better hearing than you) while your dog is eating, when he is relaxed and during play. Slowly increase the volume of the feared sounds until your dog can eat, play and relax with the sounds at a normal level. Hint: Some dogs are more relaxed during car rides. You may want to try this exercise in the car.

CAUTIONS/REMEMBER

It is important not to rush fearful dogs through the process on desensitization to the triggers of fearfulness. Forcing a dog into a situation he finds frightening can set back his rehabilitation by weeks. Patience and making small gains in the dog’s confidence will net long-term results.