

THE FEARFUL DOG

Understanding the Fearful Dog

Fear is a natural and normal response to perceived threats. A phobia is a fearful reaction that is out of proportion to the situation. While fearfulness can be helpful because it protects animals from unfamiliar things that can harm them, phobias can produce behaviors that cause injury.

Fear related problems are quite common in dogs. It may be surprising to learn that common behavior problems such as destructiveness, house soiling and aggression can be due to fear.

Fears and phobias can develop in response to people, to other animals, to inanimate objects such as vacuum cleaners, to locations such as a crate or a room in your home, to noises such as thunderstorms or gunshots, or to experiences, such as being left alone or taking a ride in the car.

Fears and phobias become a problem for your dog and for you when they occur frequently, are prolonged or severe and when they are debilitating or interfere with your dog's quality of life and your enjoyment of your pet.

What Are the Symptoms of Fear?

Fear is an emotional state that has both physiological and behavioral components. Physiological fear responses include increases in heart rate, faster breathing, dilation of the pupils in the eyes, and/or the release of chemicals, such as adrenalin, into the bloodstream.

Fearful behaviors in dogs include panting, pacing, trembling, whining or whimpering, salivating excessively, freezing, fleeing, hiding, urinating, defecation, or even expression of the anal glands.

Fearful body postures include a crouched body posture, ears back against the head, tail low or tucked against the body, eyes wide open showing the whites of the eyes, and avoidance of eye contact. Some fearful dogs may also become threatening or aggressive when they are afraid, but in this article we'll talk only about non-aggressive fearful behaviors.



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Why Do Animals Become Fearful?

Like any behavior, fears and phobias can develop from several factors that interact with one another. Research has shown that some dogs may have inherited predispositions to be fearful of people and perhaps other things such as thunderstorms.

In other cases, fears can develop as a result of one or more specific experiences. A dog that has had a painful experience at the veterinary hospital may become fearful in future visits. Other fears may develop as a result of inadequate experiences during the sensitive period for socialization which occurs from 7 to 12 weeks of age.

Puppies experience normal developmental fear periods at about 8 weeks and 12 weeks of age, when they seem to be much more likely to react fearfully to anything new. It's important that puppies not have particularly unpleasant experiences at these ages.

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Behavior modification
is the most effective
way to reduce fears.

For unknown reasons dogs sometimes develop strange fears ranging from being afraid of a particular television program to going into a certain room at night. It is not necessary to know precisely how or why a fear developed to successfully manage or modify the behavior.

Managing Your Dog's Fearful Behaviors

Some fears can be managed by simply preventing your dog from being exposed to whatever causes her to be fearful. If she's afraid of your vacuum cleaner for example, take her for a walk or put her outside while you vacuum. In other cases, management may not be practical, but instead your dog's fearful reaction needs to be changed. The most effective way to reduce or eliminate most fears is to use behavior modification techniques known as systematic desensitization and counter conditioning.

Desensitization and Counter Conditioning

These techniques are explained more thoroughly in the article by the same name, that you should read, but they'll be explained briefly here. Desensitization involves the gradual exposure of the animal to the person, place or thing that triggers the fear, but in such a way that it doesn't actually cause a fearful response.

There are two types of counter conditioning, but the one that is best used with fearful behavior has to do with changing the animal's emotional state. This can be done by pairing the fear-producing stimulus with another stimulus that usually produces joy, pleasure, or relaxation. This might be a tasty treat, a ball to fetch or a relaxing body massage. These emotional states are counter to, or incompatible with fear. A dog can't be happily fetching a ball and at the same time be fearful.

When used together, these two techniques are generally the best way to decrease fearful behavior. It is likely you will need help from a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist, or perhaps another well qualified behavior consultant to help you apply these techniques. If these techniques are used incorrectly at best they won't be effective, and at worse they can intensify the fearful behavior.

Flooding

Flooding involves exposing the animal to the fear-producing stimulus continuously until she stops showing any signs of fear at all. Flooding can take many hours of continuous exposure and can be quite stressful as well as dangerous for the animal and the people working with her. Because it can be quite difficult to do, we do not recommend it unless you are working with an experienced certified applied or veterinary behaviorist.

Medication

Medications, prescribed by veterinarians and used under their supervision, can be useful in helping some animals overcome their fears. They are usually used in conjunction with behavior modification. You should recognize that medication alone rarely results in long-term or permanent reduction of fearful behavior.

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How Can Fears Be Prevented?

Since some fears may have genetic predispositions, avoid acquiring a dog whose parents or other relatives are known to be overly fearful. Animals with severe fears or phobias should never be bred.

Similarly, if you acquire a dog with an unknown history that is quite shy and timid, recognize that to some degree these may be life long behavior patterns. At the very least, you will need to invest considerable effort using the techniques described to help such a dog overcome her fears.

One of the best ways to prevent fear related problems is through good socialization from 4-16 weeks of age. Puppy socialization classes conducted by knowledgeable instructors can be quite helpful. Puppies should also be exposed in a gentle and non-frightening way to normal sights, sounds and things that they will experience during their lives. Adult animals should be exposed to new things gradually and in a non-frightening way.

What Not To Do

Never punish fear motivated behaviors, including destructiveness, house soiling and aggression. Punishing a fearful dog is cruel, and will only increase her fear. It will not stop her fearful behavior.

Avoid forcing your dog to experience things that frighten her. Trying to show your dog that what she's afraid of is harmless won't help her "get over it" because fears are not rational.

Don't crate or confine your dog in a small area, such as a laundry room, if she's fearful or phobic. Close confinement often makes the panic worse and can lead the animal to hurt herself trying to escape.

Fearful emotions are not much affected by rewards. The belief that fears can be rewarded by attention from people is a myth. Trying to comfort or calm a fearful dog will not increase her fear. In fact, in some cases such treatment can significantly reduce the fear.

Recognizing the Fearful Dog

The drawing at left shows many elements of the body postures of fearful and phobic dogs. Notice that fearful dogs often have a crouched body posture, or they will lie down and sometimes roll over on their backs exposing their bellies. They will usually try to move away from the source of the fear. They often have their tails tucked between their legs, their ears pinned back against their head, their eyes wide open to expose the whites of the eyes and they often avoid direct eye contact with the person or animal they are afraid of. When they are around people they are afraid of, their lips may be retracted exposing the teeth in a submissive grin. Very frightened dogs may whine, whimper or even yelp. They may also shake, pant, salivate excessively, express their anal glands or even urinate or defecate. Recognize that dogs in pain may show some of these characteristics as well. You can learn more about reading dog body postures from the DVD "Canine Body Postures" available from us or from www.HelpingFido.com.



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