



## THE FEARFUL DOG

Used with permission from Denver Dumb Friends League and Humane Society of the United States.

Dogs can be afraid of a lot of different things. A frightened dog might also do a lot of different things when it's afraid. Scared dogs might freeze, or try to run away, to calm down the scary thing, or to scare away the scary thing.

Scared dogs might do things like:

- Roll onto their backs
- Run away or hide
- Tuck their tails
- Pant
- Drool
- Tremble or shake
- Pace
- Lick their lips
- Widen their eyes to show the whites of their eyes
- Avoid eye contact or stare
- Urinate or defecate
- Freeze
- Bark or growl
- Bare their teeth, snap, and bite

This can be a bit confusing – why do some dogs stare while others avoid eye contact? Some dogs might even do one thing in one situation, and behave differently the next time. That's why it's important to familiarize yourself with dog body language.

Read on to learn more about the causes of fearful behavior in dogs and what to do about it.

### **Causes of Fearful Behavior**

Dogs can be afraid of just about anything. Noises, sights, sounds, smells, or movement can all be scary for a dog. Figuring out why your dog is afraid isn't always necessary to fix the problem, but it often helps.

Often fear comes from a **lack of exposure**. Dogs are naturally afraid of new things, and dogs that grew up in a deprived environment might be jumpier around "normal" things like traffic cones or men in hats. Even dogs that had a normal upbringing are often afraid of new things that we humans know are harmless. This is why it's so important to expose your dog to lots of new things in a fun and safe way!

Other times, dogs might be afraid of things because of a **scary past experience**. A dog might have had a bad experience with a certain place, sound, type of person, or object. If the experience was scary enough, they'll probably be scared of it next time they see it.

Some dogs are also **genetically predisposed** to being more fearful. Certain breeds are known for being jumpy, suspicious, or timid. Poor genetics or just the luck of the draw can also be a factor. Getting to know your chosen breed as well as your individual animal is important. Talk to your veterinarian if you suspect that there's a genetic or medical condition related to your dog's fear.

## What You Can Do

Expecting a scared dog to “just figure it out” or “get over it” rarely works. Left untreated, fearful behaviors often just get worse. **Even with treatment, it’s important to realize that some dogs might never be cool and confident in all situations.**

We recommend taking the following steps to work through your dog’s fearfulness:

- 1) Rule out medical issues. Talk to your veterinarian and research your dog’s history if possible.
- 2) Determine your dog’s “triggers.” Make a list of everything that your dog is scared of. This can include anything from “the sound of the fan” to “other dogs” to “bikes and baby strollers.”
- 3) Create a plan to reduce your dog’s exposure to the things that scare him. While you’re training him, it’s important to not scare him more. Keep your dog and everyone else safe and happy by ensuring that contact with scary stuff is minimized. Keep your dog on leash or in a crate if you can’t avoid the scary thing.
  - a. It’s best to expect your management plan to fail. Make a plan for what to do if your dog’s trigger appears unexpectedly. It’s okay to make a U-turn in the middle of the walk or to cross the street to avoid something. Then give your dog a bunch of treats to reward him for choosing to move away from the scary thing!
- 4) Start pairing the triggers from your list with good things in controlled environments. If your dog is afraid of strollers, give your dog a treat whenever he looks at a stroller from two blocks away. When he’s excited to see the stroller (because it means treats), you can decrease the distance between you and the stroller. If your dog gets scared at any point, take a break. Then start over at the last point where you succeeded and go slower this time.
  - a. See our handout on counter-conditioning and desensitization for more detailed information.
- 5) Teach your dog to do something specific when he sees the trigger. For example, teach your dog to look at you when he hears a siren or touch your hand when he sees another dog. This helps take your dog’s mind off of the scary thing and gives him something to do instead.
- 6) Work with a trainer if your dog displays aggression when he’s afraid. It’s also a good idea to contact a trainer if your dog is afraid of a wide variety of things. See our handout on finding a good trainer for more information.

The goal is to help teach your dog that his triggers actually mean good things are coming. It’s important to avoid scaring him more during this process. Be patient and consistent, and most fears will go away!

### Clicker Training

Clicker training is a great way to train your dog with precision. You can do the steps above without a clicker. That said, with some skill and practice, clicker training will make learning faster. You can buy a clicker for just a few dollars online or at most pet stores.

- Sit in a quiet space with your dog. Start by clicking the clicker and then giving your dog a treat. Repeat this at least 15 times. Your dog should start to look for a treat when he hears the sound of the click.
- Pick an easy behavior to work on next. Choose something like looking at you or sitting down. Click and give your dog a treat every time he does this.
- Use the clicker to help with the plan above by clicking every time your dog notices his trigger. Then give him a treat. This will help the dog link the trigger with a click, which is linked to a treat.

You have to give your dog a treat every single time you click. Using a clicker is nice for this reason—it's a unique sound that always means a treat is coming. This makes it a precise way to speed up training.

## **When to Get Help**

It's important to do the training correctly or problems might get worse. Since training can be pretty difficult, it's a good idea to consider hiring a trainer. Check out our handout on finding a trainer to see what we recommend. Ensure your trainer is using positive reinforcement-based methods with no shock, prong, or choke collars. Find a certified trainer with experience working with fearful dogs. If your dog displays any aggressive behavior, such as growling, snarling, snapping, or baring his teeth, stop all behavior modification procedures and seek professional help from an animal behavior specialist as soon as possible.

## **Consult With Your Veterinarian**

Medication may be available that can help your dog feel less anxious for short time periods. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your dog. Do not attempt to give your dog any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting with your veterinarian. Animals do not respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for humans could be fatal to your dog. **Drug therapy alone will not reduce fears and phobias permanently, but medication can help make training more effective.**

## **Other Products**

There are pheromone and other types of products available to help with anxiety and stress relief in dogs. None of these is an automatic cure for fear/anxiety, but should be used alongside training. Check with your veterinarian and do your research to ensure that these products are safe and a good fit for your needs. See our handout "Stress Relief for Your Pet" for more information.

## **What Not To Do**

- Do not punish your dog for being afraid. Punishment will only make him more fearful. Animals do not understand punishment after the fact, even if it is only seconds later. Don't yell, swat, shock, or pull on the leash.
- Do not try to force your dog to experience the object or situation that is causing him to be afraid. For example, if he is afraid of bicycles and you force him to stand in place while bicycles whiz by, he will probably become more fearful, rather than less fearful of bicycles.