

FEARFUL DOG

Why do dogs show fear?

Although there may sometimes be no clear reasoning in our mind, dogs can develop a fear of many things (such as people, other animals, places, noises or things). It is completely normal for a dog to show a fear response to something it is fearful of, however the long term implications and lack of ability to recover is not only detrimental to the dogs physical and mental health, but is also a risk to others.

It is important to understand that determining why your dog is fearful is not always essential in treating the behaviour. In order to correctly address the problem, you need to identify what the fearful stimulus is, and be aware the certain situations, people and places may provoke the behavior more than others.

What causes fear?

Fear is a physiologic, behavioural and emotional reaction to something that the animal encounters. This physiologic reaction may result in an increase in heart rate, increased respiratory rate (panting), trembling, pacing and possibly urination and defecation. Dogs may display a variety of behaviours when they are afraid. Some may try to escape, bark or growl, show submissive body postures such as lowering their body and head and tucking their tail under their body. Some other responses are destructive behaviour, salivation, toileting, pacing, excess activity, shaking, vocalizing, escaping, self-injury and depression. A dog's reaction is dependent on the individual dog.

What not to do:

- Do not punish your dog for being afraid. Punishment will only make him more fearful.
- Do not try to force your dog to endure or be close to something that frightens them (e.g. Visitors at home or strangers wanting to pet them when on a walk).
- Merely trying to prevent your dog from escaping or destroying things will not properly address the problem. Attention to the symptoms of the fear, rather than the fear itself can result in your dog increasing the intensity of its response or find another way to show their fears – whether by digging, climbing, jumping, chewing, barking or howling.

What you can do:

The good news is that there are things that you can do to reduce your dog's fearful reaction. If left untreated however, your dog's fearful behaviour will more than likely get worse. Below are some suggestions, which will help you, achieve the best results.

Desensitising or Counter Conditioning

This is a technique that involves gradually exposing your dog to the frightful stimulus. By doing this, you may in time, reduce your dog's fearful response to that stimulus.

You will need to begin at a distance / level that does not frighten your dog and pair it with something pleasant like a treat or a game. Then gradually increase the distance / level as you continue to offer something special and pleasant. You are aiming to associate good things with something that your dog previously.

Obedience Training / Tricks

Teaching your dog basic tricks and obedience is very useful in many situations, and has multiple benefits. It is a great way to build confidence, to keep your dog's attention on you, will assist in taking their mind off what if frightening them, give you more control of the situation and is fun for both you and your dog. In addition to this, rewarding your dog for sitting near the cause of fear will not only reinforce appropriate behaviour, but will also assist in creating a positive association with the stimulus that causes the fear.

Distract Your Dog

This method works best if your dog is showing subtle signs of fear or before the dog has become really anxious. Encourage your dog to play a game or engage in activity that is going to take their mind off what is frightening them. Things like chews or toys like Kongs, Buster Cubes, Treatballs or Aussie Dog products can be helpful. By giving some basic obedience commands frequently, your dog's fearful response will delay for longer periods each time.

Create a Safe and Predictable Environment

Create a safe place that your dog can go when there is something around that frightens them (e.g. male visitors). Pay attention to where they go, or try to go, when they are frightened and provide them access to that place. They should be allowed to come and go freely from this location, confining them in this area can cause further problems. Refer to the 'Crate Training' info sheet for more information.

Teach Your Dog to Touch

Teaching your dog to nose touch your hand has multiple benefits. It is great for building confidence in a shy or timid dog, to position your dog where you would like him to be, and can be a great way to keep your dog's attention on you. It's easy to teach, fun for both you and your dog, and dogs love it!

Hold your open hand at your dog's nose level with your palm facing him. When he sniffs your hand, use the marker word "yes" and quickly give him a treat from your other hand. You could rub a little of his favourite food treat on the palm of your target hand for a little extra encouragement if needed. Repeat this until the dog is eagerly nose touching your hand for the treat. At this point, you can introduce the verbal cue 'touch' when he touches your hand, and then treat. When he is reliably performing on cue, start varying the position of your hand; see if you can get your dog to touch your hand to the left, to the right, up high, down low, between your legs etc. You could even see if your dog will 'touch' different objects!

You will generally need to combine several strategies for the best outcome for your dog. With patience and understanding many dogs can learn to cope more effectively with the things that initially seemed so scary.

