

FEARS AND PHOBIAS: ANIMALS AND PEOPLE

My dog seems to be afraid of people and or other animals-why might that be?

There are many reasons that dogs can develop a fear of people. First, 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. Second, 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 a fight and subsequent injury from other dogs. 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.

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.

What signs might my dog show when she is afraid?

When frightened, 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. Naturally growling, or snarling would indicate aggression, but may also indicate fear.

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 and prevent them from progressing. First, it is important to identify what is the fearful stimulus. 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, which provoke the behavior more than others.

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.

Next, you need to also examine what factors may be reinforcing the behavior. Some owners actually reward the fearful behavior by reassuring their pets with vocal intonations or body contact. Aggressive displays are a successful way of getting the fearful stimulus to leave and thus also reinforce the behaviors. Any ongoing interactions that are fear provoking need to be identified. This could be teasing behaviors, painful interactions including the use of punishment (discussed previously), or overwhelming stimuli.

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 in addition, a head collar will be needed. Head collars allow control of the dog's head and neck to ensure that the dog responds to the given command (sit, quiet, heel). To make the dog feel more secure by knowing who is the "leader", orient the dog away from the stimulus, and prevent the dog from either causing injury or escaping.

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.

Lastly, begin counter-conditioning and desensitization to acclimate the dog to the stimuli that usually cause the fearful response. This needs to be done slowly. This is where the gradient that you established earlier becomes helpful. 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. Gradually, if the dog exhibits no fear, the stimulus intensity is increased. It is extremely important that this is done slowly. The goal is to reward good behavior, and teach the dog how to associate the once fearful stimulus with calmness and rewards. If the dog begins to show fear during training, it is progressing too fast and could be making the problem worse. Always set up the dog to succeed. 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, you should refrain from using reassuring vocal intonation and body contact. This does not "soothe the savage beast" but rather serves as reinforcement. As long as the dog is wearing a leash and head halter, it may be reoriented to face the owner, respond to a pull and sit command, and learn to ignore or accept the approaching stimulus. Only if the dog cannot escape and can be made to calm down before the stimulus leaves, will the dog learn that the stimulus is not to be feared and will do no harm.