

Del Ray Animal Hospital
524 E. Mount Ida Ave.
Alexandria, VA 22301
(703) 739-0000
www.delrayanimalhospital.com

Fears Of Noises, Locations, and Objects

Landsberg G, Hunthausen W, Ackerman L 2003 Handbook of Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat. Saunders, Edinburgh # 2003, Elsevier Science Limited. All rights reserved.

There are many different stimuli that can frighten your dog. This handout is designed to develop a program for improving or resolving fear to inanimate stimuli such as places, noises, or objects. When the fear is excessive or exaggerated, your dog may be exhibiting a panic response in which case drug therapy might be useful in combination with the behavior techniques below. Fear can be generalized so that it occurs as a response to a variety of noises or locations, or whenever it is confronted with something new or novel, or it may be a specific fear or phobia such as thunderstorms or a specific location (e.g., tile floors).

Treatment of fear

In simple terms, the pet must be exposed to the fearful stimulus until it sees that there is nothing to fear and settles down. If the association with the stimulus can be turned into one that is positive, the pet may actually develop a positive attitude when exposed to the stimulus.

Desensitization is used in combination with counterconditioning to change a pet's attitude or 'feeling' about the stimulus from one that is negative to one that is positive. Desensitization involves controlled exposure to situations or stimuli that are weaker or milder than will cause fear. Counterconditioning is then used to change the dog's response to the stimulus (noise, location, object) by associating the dog's favored rewards with the stimulus. The dog is then gradually introduced to similar but progressively more intense stimuli paired together with the presentation of the favored reward. If an inappropriate response (fear, escape attempts, aggression) is exhibited then an attempt should be made to interrupt the situation and calm the dog, at which point a reward can be given for success.

Response substitution is used to train the dog to perform or display a new acceptable response (e.g., sit, settle) each time it is exposed to the stimulus. Again, rather than attempting to overcome an intense response, the training should be set up to expose the dog with stimuli of reduced intensity to ensure a successful outcome. A head halter and leash can be used to ensure success and both the release (negative reinforcement) and positive reinforcement can be used to mark and reinforce an acceptable relaxed response.

Owner responses such as a raised voice, anxiety, fear, or punishment will only serve to heighten the pet's fear or anxiety. Similarly, an overly intense exposure to the stimulus will further aggravate anxiety. Be certain to retrain only with calm, controlled stimuli. The goal of training is to reinforce appropriate, desirable responses. Therefore, it is critical that rewards are not given and that the stimulus and the dog are not removed from the situation until the dog is calm and settled.

Steps for treating a pet that is fearful of inanimate objects and sounds

1. Identify all stimuli and situations that cause the pet to be fearful. Remember that there can be multiple stimuli that add to the fearful response so that each stimulus should be identified separately. For example, a pet that is fearful of a vacuum cleaner might be afraid of the sound or sight of the vacuum cleaner, the person using the vacuum cleaner, and the locations in which it is used. Pets fearful of thunder may also react to the rain, the flashes of lightening, increasing darkness, and even the drop in barometric pressure or static electric charges associated with the storm.

2. Do your best to prevent your dog from experiencing the stimuli except during the retraining sessions. This may be difficult for certain stimuli such as thunderstorms so that the options may be to use sedatives or confinement areas where your dog can avoid the stimuli (e.g., a room with no windows, minimal noise from the outside, and music for distraction).
3. Train the dog to relax or settle on command, in the absence of any fear-evoking stimuli (see our handout on settle training). Begin in an environment where the dog is calm, focused, and has minimal distractions. Gradually proceed to progressively more difficult and distracting locations and situations. The initial conditioning should be done by family members with whom the pet is calmest, most controlled, and responsive. For some dogs, using a head halter improves the speed and safety of training. Once the dog will reliably settle, focus on the family member, and accept rewards in a variety of environments then training can progress to more fear and anxiety-evoking situations.
4. For storm and fireworks phobias it can be extremely useful to train the pet to settle or go to a location where the dog feels comfortable and secure, and where the auditory and visual stimuli can be minimized, such as a crate with a blanket or cardboard appliance box as cover. In addition, positive cues can be implemented that further calm and distract the dog. This can be accomplished by pairing a CD, video, white noise, or even a towel or blanket that has the owner's scent with each positive settle training session.
5. Each stimulus that leads to fear must be identified and placed along a gradient. The gradients must be set up so that initial exposures are mild. Each stimulus must be muted or minimized and presented in a controlled manner. It will be necessary to find some means of reproducing the stimuli so that they can be muted or minimized and presented in a controlled manner along a gradient of increasingly stronger stimuli. A tape recording, video, or CD might be a good starting point for retraining to the sound of the stimulus. Location and the person handling and training might also be factors that could be controlled to reduce the fearful response. For example, if a pet is afraid of the sound of the vacuum, the sight of the vacuum, the movement of the vacuum, the person using the vacuum, and the location of exposure, then these may all need to be controlled and introduced separately.
6. Determine the pet's most favored rewards (reinforcer assessment) and save these for the retraining and conditioning sessions. For some pets, food is the strongest reinforcer, while others may be more responsive to a favored play toy or social contact. The reward is presented to the pet along each step of the gradient for non-fearful responses, such as a relaxed sit. The trainer should use a quiet, relaxed, upbeat tone of voice.
7. Advance along the gradients very slowly. If you happen to proceed through a step too quickly and the pet responds fearfully, everyone should relax, look away from the pet, and ignore it. Once the fear response has ceased for five seconds or more, the stimulus can be reintroduced at a slightly lower level and desensitization and counterconditioning proceed.
8. Once each stimulus has been controlled and presented along a gradient of increasingly stronger stimuli and the pet acts calmly and shows no anxiety in the presence of any of the single stimuli, the separate elements can then be combined and gradually introduced as a group (e.g., the vacuum running, with a person moving it toward the pet).

Considerations

If the stimulus evokes anxiety from the beginning of the training session and the dog cannot be calmed or the pet is not responsive to commands, then either the stimulus is not sufficiently muted, the dog is not sufficiently trained or controlled, or the reward is not sufficiently motivating. It may be necessary to redesign a proper stimulus gradient so that a slower, more cautious approach can be taken. Command–reward training should be reviewed in the absence of any stimuli. A leash and head halter may need to be considered. Stronger reinforcers should be used or feeding time can be delayed to increase the pet's appetite.

Remaining calm is important for everyone. Any anxiety displayed by the owner or person doing the training as well as any anxiety or fear associated with exposure to the stimulus may further increase the pet's anxiety. Punishments and harsh corrections should also be avoided.

