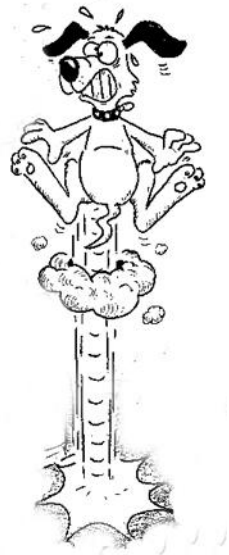


FEARS AND PHOBIAS – ANIMALS AND PEOPLE

Why is my dog afraid of people and/or other animals?

There are many reasons that dogs can develop a fear of people or the other animals. Firstly, 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. Secondly, 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?

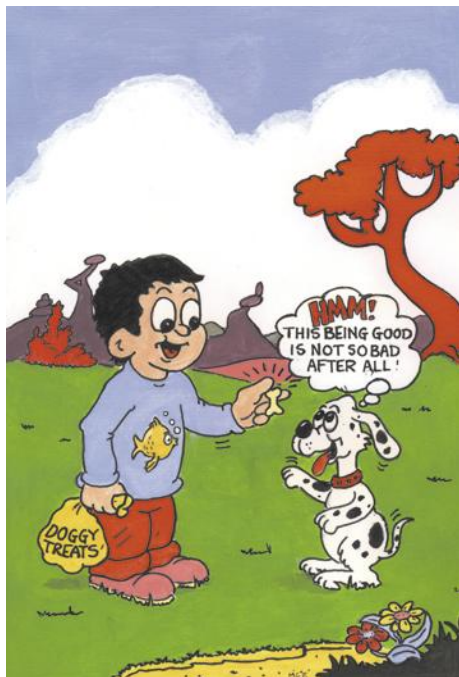
When frightened, a dog may cower, look away, tuck its tail and perhaps tremble or pant. At other times the signs may be subtler. A dog may only duck its head and look away, and tolerate petting at first, but then snap. It is important to watch your dog for signs of uneasiness such as backing up, hiding behind you and licking of the lips. Naturally growling, or snarling would indicate aggression, but may also indicate fear. (see our handout on ‘Fears, Phobias and Anxieties’).

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 to improve the problem or at the very least 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, that 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 manifestations of fear such as trembling or growling 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, anxiety or aggression on the part of the stimulus (people or other animal), anxiety on the part of the owner/handler, 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, and 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. See our handout on 'Puppy – Training Basics'.

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 and cannot begin until your dog can reliably relax on command in the absence of the stimulus. This is where the gradient that you established earlier becomes helpful and can be the most difficult part of the program since it is generally necessary to set up situations where you can control the dog and the stimulus. Therefore, inviting people to the house, or having some neighborhood children ride their bikes back and forth along the street, may be necessary so that you can insure that the stimuli are predictable and well controlled (see the example of delivery people below). 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 (see our handout 'Behavior Modification - desensitization, counter-

conditioning, differential reinforcement and flooding’). It is extremely important that this is done slowly. The goal is to associate a calm, positive outcome with the once fearful stimulus by only rewarding the desirable response. 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, do not raise your voice or punish your dog as this will further increase his or her anxiety. If your dog is wearing a head halter it may be possible to reorient the dog so that you can get eye contact and to pull up and settle the dog so that the dog learns to ignore or accept the approaching stimulus. Another option is to use a “happy” tone of voice and walk just far enough away that the dog can be successfully distracted and settled.

How might these techniques be used in a training situation?

Take the example of fear toward a delivery person. Begin by training the dog to sit and stay quietly throughout the house and then by the window and doorway in the absence of anyone approaching. Use only reward based training techniques along with perhaps a head halter to ensure success. Use clicker training or a favored reward such as a toy or treat to mark and reward acceptable responses. As the dog



begins to anticipate that a favored reward is imminent the dog’s attitude or “mood” should be positive rather than anxious and aggressive. The relaxed sit stay and expectation of rewards are incompatible with the behavior you wish to change, in this case lunging at the window at a delivery person. Once the dog learns to quickly settle and anticipate food at each location on command, training with varying forms of the stimulus can begin. It may take days or weeks for the dog to learn how to perform this task reliably on command. During that time phase out food rewards so that the dog does the task equally well with or without food.

Next, train the pet to perform the desired behavior in the presence of a variety of stimuli that are similar to the actual problem stimulus (e.g. strangers walking across the property). Using desensitization, the stimulus is presented at a muted or low enough level so that the dog can be kept settled and shows no fear or anxiety. Training could begin by having a family member stand by or walk by the window, and then progress to a stranger at the edge of the property. The owner then practices the training to ensure that a calm settle response is achieved and rewarded. Again favored rewards, toys or clicker training should be used for each new step in the program. Again a head halter can be used to ensure a quick and successful response. Repeat this many times so that the dog does it reliably and gradually have the person move closer to the window until the person can walk by while the dog relaxes or plays and gets its reward. Rewards are faded out once each new level is achieved and reintroduced for each new step along the way.

The dog is learning the new acceptable response that earns the reward (response substitution) and is acquiring a positive association with the stimulus. Proceed slowly, so that the dog learns to perform the desired behavior over and over before being challenged with the real thing,

Finally, progress to stimuli that more closely resemble the real life situation. Perhaps have the dog sit by the window when a friend or family member dressed as a delivery person walks by the property and finally progress to sessions with delivery people. Some dogs may progress faster if the training is done outside with stimuli across the street or walking across the property.