

How to Help Shy, Anxious, or Fearful Dogs

Dogs can be fearful for many reasons, including genetics, lack of early socialization, and traumatic experience. But regardless of the reason, there are things you can do to help.

1. Take rehabilitation in slow, gradual steps. One of the best ways to help a dog who is afraid of a specific thing, whether it's other dogs, strangers, or your vacuum cleaner, is by employing the technique known as desensitization. That means exposing your dog to the thing that frightens him—the trigger—in a systematic, gradual way. For example, if your dog were afraid of the sound of the vacuum cleaner, you could start by turning the vacuum on when your dog was in the next room. Once he was comfortable at that distance, you could turn it on when he was just outside the room. Eventually you would work up to his being comfortable with the sound up close. Through desensitization, your dog will learn at his own pace that the big, scary thing really isn't so bad. Never use "flooding," which means forcing your dog to confront the thing that frightens him. Flooding can be traumatic to your dog, make the problem much worse, and create trust issues between you.

2. Use classical conditioning by pairing the scary thing with something your dog really likes. Let's say your dog is afraid of other dogs. Start at a distance at which your dog is comfortable, whether it's ten feet from passing dogs, or fifty. Every time another dog appears, start feeding your dog treats. Keep feeding them rapidly, one after another. If you'd like, you can also chat cheerfully to your dog at the same time. But once the other dog is gone, the treats and chatting should stop immediately. By teaching your dog that good things happen when other dogs appear and stop when they're gone, a change will eventually occur in your dog's emotional response. It will no longer be, Oh no, another dog, run away! but Oh good, another dog, where's my treat?

3. Never push your dog over threshold. In the best of all worlds, when working on a desensitization and conditioning program, your dog would never feel so uncomfortable that he would run away, bark, or show any reaction that signals fear. To work toward that goal, learn to read your dog's body language. Dogs give subtle signals when they are afraid. We all know about flattened ears and a tucked tail, but yawning, licking the lips, a tense, stiff body, scratching, and sniffing the ground are also signs that your dog may be nervous. (Look around the vet's waiting room the next time you're there; you're likely to notice many of these signals.) If you are working with your dog and see any of these signs, back off to a distance that does not trigger your dog's reaction. In the event that your dog does react, leave the area as calmly as possible and start at a greater distance the next time.

4. In some cases, habituation can help. If your dog is simply shy, or hasn't spent much time around other dogs or people, take your dog with you everywhere you can. This should only be done if your dog's level of stress is mild. Your dog will eventually habituate—get used to—being around people and dogs.

5. Teach people to use non-threatening body language. If your dog is shy of people, allow her to approach them in her own time instead of the other way around. A person walking toward your dog and leaning over her can be frightening! Petting is another consideration. Most people want to pet a dog palm-down over the dog's head, which can be scary for the dog. Once your dog has approached someone, ask that person to pet your dog on the chest or side of the face, without staring at her or leaning over her. The person can even turn their body to the side. This body language will make your dog more comfortable.

6. Seek the help of a professional trainer who specializes in behavior issues. A trainer can evaluate your dog's issues, pinpoint exactly what triggers the fear response, design a protocol to help work through the issues, and give you feedback and support. Owners are sometimes not as concerned about their dog's fear issues as they are about things like destructive chewing or bad manners, but fear issues are often at the root of these symptoms, and should be taken seriously. Chronic stress can be very unhealthy for any dog, and can even cause impairment of the immune system, just as it can in people. And some fear issues, such as fear of unfamiliar people and dogs, can eventually turn into aggression issues if left untreated. So do yourself and your dog a favor and address his issues, with the help of a professional if necessary. The Association of Pet Dog Trainers (www.apdt.com) has a state by state listing of trainers and is a good place to start.

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