

# THE FEARFUL DOG

Often, we don't know the exact cause of fear for our dogs. Dogs can be fearful for many reasons including genetics, lack of early socialization, exposure to something scary during the developmental period or a traumatic experience. Regardless of the reason for being fearful, there are ways you can help your dog overcome it. With time, training and patience your dog will eventually learn to enjoy (or at least be ok with) the things she finds scary.

First and foremost, check in with your veterinarian to be sure that there is not a medical cause for the fearful behavior. Disease, injury, poor vision, poor hearing, thyroid imbalance, etc. can all cause a dog to behave in a fearful manner.

## IS SHE AFRAID?

It is important to learn to read your dog's body language so you can recognize her fear signals. Behaviors such as shaking, trembling, ears back, excessive salivation, tucked tail, wide eyes, whining, averting eyes, crouching, frantically looking around or attempting to flee are all signs that indicate she is worried about something.

## TRIGGERS & THRESHOLDS

Understanding what your dog is afraid of and just how afraid she is, is the first step in helping her to become less fearful. Begin by identifying and making a list of all your dog's triggers. Triggers are the things that your dog finds scary. Second, take note of your dog's threshold to each of these triggers. The threshold is the amount of the scary thing your dog can handle before she begins behaving in a fearful manner. It is vitally important that during training you do not put your dog over her threshold.

## MANAGEMENT

The second step to helping your fearful dog is to manage the environment to the best of your ability to limit her exposure to the things she finds scary. Continually exposing your dog to something she finds scary will only make the fearful behaviors worse. During times when managing your dog's environment is out of your control, remain calm and do your best to help your dog relax until the scary thing is gone or remove your dog from the situation.

## WHAT CAN I DO?

There are several options you can utilize to help your fearful dog. The most common and helpful techniques are listed below. If you are not confident in doing the techniques below, seek the help of a professional trainer who specializes in working with behavioral issues using positive reinforcement. A trainer can evaluate your dog's triggers, design a protocol to work through the issue(s) and provide you with feedback and support.



## CONFIDENCE BUILDING

Regardless of what your dog is fearful of, building confidence through training will help. If a standard group training class is too much for your dog to handle, explore training options via private or in-home lessons. At the end of this article are instructions for three fun games to play with your dog in your home that will help build her confidence.

## DESENSITIZATION & COUNTER CONDITIONING

If your dog is afraid of a specific thing, desensitization and counter conditioning is a good technique to start with. With desensitization you are exposing your dog to her trigger (i.e. the thing she finds scary) in a slow and gradual way. *It is important that your dog remains under her threshold during this type of training. If you notice signs of fearful behavior, move away from the trigger to a distance in which she is no longer showing fearful behaviors.*

At the same time as exposing your dog her trigger, you are pairing that trigger with something she loves. The easiest thing to use are tiny pieces of a super, yummy treat like cheese or chicken. While your dog is exposed to the trigger you will give her the treat. Once the trigger is gone, you stop giving her the treats.

So, if your dog is afraid of bicycles begin by placing a bicycle at a distance in which your dog remains calm and is not showing signs of fear. As soon as your dog sees the bicycle, begin feeding her the treats. Continue feeding the treats, one after another, until the bicycle is gone. Slowly and gradually decrease the distance between the bicycle and your dog.

## MEDICATION

There are medications available that may help dogs that are very fearful. You will need to schedule a visit with a veterinary behaviorist to discuss medication options. Keep in mind, medication must be combined with a behavior protocol for it to be successful.

## CONFIDENCE BUILDING GAMES

### TOUCH (HAND TARGETING)

1. Put a treat in between your middle and index fingers
2. Put your hand, palm side facing away from you, about six (6) inches from your dog's nose
3. Wait for your dog to inspect (sniff, lick, touch etc.) your hand then say, "Yes" or "Good" and give a treat from your other hand
4. After several repetitions, remove the treat from your fingers and see if your dog will touch your hand with his/her nose
  - If not, go back to putting a treat between your fingers and try again without the treat later
5. Gradually increase the distance and height of your hand from your dog's nose and switch between your right and left hands

### NEW & COOL

1. Find six (6) objects that your dog has not seen up close before
2. Place the six (6) objects in a circle on the floor (make sure your dog does not see you placing the objects down)
3. With your dog on the leash enter the room where the objects are
4. Unclip the leash and allow your dog to explore
5. As soon as your dog investigates an object, no matter what he/she is doing, say, "Yes" or "Good" and give your dog a treat
6. Gradually replace an old object with a new object, one at a time



## HIDE & SEEK

- 1) Find six (6) boxes
- 2) Place a few very smelly treats (like cheese, chicken, steak) inside each box
- 3) Place the six (6) boxes on the floor
- 4) With your dog on the leash enter the room where the boxes are
- 5) Unclip the leash and allow your dog to follow his/her nose to treats inside the boxes
- 6) Begin this exercise with easy to access boxes (i.e. low to the ground, no lids, etc.)
- 7) Gradually make it more difficult for your dog access the treat in the box (i.e. add lids, turn box upside down, etc.)
- 8) Gradually expand the area in which the boxes are (i.e. move them farther apart, then place in different room, etc.)

## PAWSITIVELY HELPFUL HINTS



Keep your voice low and calm when interacting with a fearful dog. Avoid shouting or speaking in high pitched tones.



Be mindful of your body language when interacting with a fearful dog. Avoid direct eye contact, get down to the dog's level and move slowly and let the dog come to you.



Use small bits of **very high value** treats like chicken, cheese, lunch meat and steak when working with a fearful dog.



Make sure the dog has a safe space in your home - a space where the dog can go to relax.



Several short training sessions are better than a few long sessions.



Always stop a training session on a positive note.



If you get frustrated during a training session, stop and try again later.



Have patience - changing the behavior of a fearful dog will take time.

