

Fear and Fear-related Aggression in Dogs

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What is Fear?

Fear is a natural emotion that causes an animal to avoid situations and activities that may be dangerous. What or who the pet perceives to be dangerous may not be the same as the person's perception, and can be independent of actual bodily risk. However, pets act on what they perceive.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is the anticipation of future danger that may be unknown, imagined, or real. It can result in the body responding as it does when the animal is afraid.

What is Stress?

Stress is the body's physiologic response triggered by anxiety and fear. This response results in dilated pupils, increased heart rate, increased respiratory rate, and increased blood pressure.

Why is a Dog Fearful and/or Anxious?

Behavior is shaped by many different factors. A fearful or anxious dog usually does not have a past history of abuse, as many believe. More often than not, it is a lack of experience or knowledge with that fearful stimuli that drives the behavior instead.

Individual genetics and breed differences can play an important role in dogs' behavior. Genetics influences behavior and which genes are expressed, depends on the dog's early experiences and environment, including before birth. Behavioral genetics are complicated; a puppy's behavior won't be exactly like her parents', just as her coat or eye color may not be exactly like her parents'.

Inadequate socialization can be influential in the development of fearful and anxious behavior. Socialization is the short developmental phase where puppies need to have positive experiences with a variety of different people, places, and things in order to generalize those to even more people/places/things. Without proper socialization, dogs do not learn adequate coping skills to respond appropriately when fearful or anxious. It is important to not force exposure, it needs to occur where the puppy feels comfortable.



Photo courtesy of Dr. Christine Calder

Dogs are constantly learning and they learn with every interaction. They learn what works to relieve stress and help them feel safe. Strategies that work for them may include escape or avoidance, freeze (learned helplessness), or aggression. They also learn what works in each individual context or situation.

One way to think of these different factors that affect behavioral development is like following a recipe for something like stew. Genetics is the equivalent of the recipe, the basic code for what to do. If your recipe has problems, your stew probably won't taste good. That is why it's so important to only breed dogs who don't have behavior problems. Socialization is like the ingredients you put into the recipe. If you leave ingredients out or use ones that have spoiled, your stew will not come out right either. Learning is what you do with the stew after you've followed the recipe. Even a stew made with a good recipe and great ingredients can taste bad if a couple of key steps are missed. We need to make sure that we continue to teach our dogs how to feel safe and secure.

What is Socialization?

The socialization developmental stage in dogs takes place between the ages of 3–14 weeks. For some breeds this period lasts a little longer and others are shorter. Dogs are born without fear. Their eyes and ears are closed, and they spend the first two weeks sleeping, eating, and keeping warm. During the second to third week of life, when ears and eyes start to open, dogs start to explore their environment and begin learning what is “safe” and “unsafe” in their world.

Socialization is the process of learning how to cope and feel safe in one's environment and with other members of society. For a pet dog, this means learning to be comfortable with the sights and sounds inside a house and outside in yards and on streets. It means learning about all sorts of different people, different ages, genders, sizes, and races. As well as the different sorts of animals they may live with or encounter on walks.

Why Do some Dogs Use Aggression?

Dogs have three basic strategies they may choose to use when they are afraid or anxious: fight, flight, or freeze. These behaviors that accompany fight, flight or freeze are all normal social behaviors in dogs. They are used to communicate a dog's emotional state to another dog, person or other species. All three of these strategies are considered “distance increasing” behaviors, since they are intended to make what the dog perceives as a threat go away. Dogs will use “distance decreasing” behaviors, like play bows, to signal that they want someone to come closer.

Aggression (barking, growling, lunging, and biting) or “fight” is a normal social behavior dogs use to communicate their emotional state to another dog, person, or other species. This strategy may be chosen if the dog is uncertain about the outcome of an interaction, conflicted, afraid, or anxious. Aggression increases distance between the frightening thing and the dog. Aggression may be chosen as the first strategy if the dog has learned that it was successful in the past, or if other behaviors such as freezing, or avoidance were not successful. Behaviors seen during “fight” or aggression include:

- Barking
- Growling
- Baring teeth (snarling)
- Lunging
- Biting

Social behaviors that may be observed during avoidance or flight are:

- Avoiding eye contact
- Crouching down to look small
- Lip licking
- Yawning
- Moving away

Freeze behavior may include:

- Standing still
- Head down
- Paw raised
- Pupils dilated
- Wrinkled brow
- Lips drawn
- Mouth closed
- A direct stare
- Hair raised on the back

Dogs show these behaviors when they are uncertain, afraid or anxious about the outcome of an interaction. The strategy chosen by each dog may change based on the situation, including the people, places, and things involved. The strategy used is also influenced by a dog's genetics and learning. Often as a situation progresses you may see a dog showing a mix of strategies at once or changing from one strategy to another.

Aggression can be successful at making someone a dog considers "scary" go away. As a dog uses aggression and learns how well it works, the dog may show fewer signs of anxiety and appear more confident. The aggression is still rooted in the dog's fear of the other dog, person or situation. The dog only appears confident because he has found a way to reduce his fear.

Why is Choice Important?

When fear is motivating a behavior, choice is important. If the choice to avoid is taken away, an animal may switch to aggression instead. These actions takes away your dog's choice to avoid whatever is causing him fear and may drive aggression:

- Restrain them
- Grab their collar
- Pick them up
- Hold them down
- Hold them still
- Place them on their side (alpha roll)

These methods may also make your dog more anxious or fearful of you. Fearful or anxious animals should never be forced to stay; they should always be encouraged to move away.

How do we Reduce Fear, Anxiety, and Stress?

We can reduce fear and anxiety by recognizing the signs and controlling the environment. Aggressive displays such as barking, growling, and lunging are a dog's way of telling you they do not want to interact with a particular person or other animal. Hiding, cowering, tail tucked,

dilated pupils, ears back, and shaking indicate they would rather be somewhere else. It is the human's responsibility to recognize these signs and help the pet feel safe by moving away or removing the dog from the frightening situation.

Avoid forcing your pet to interact with a person or dog if they are uncomfortable and never force your pet to remain in a situation where they are fearful or anxious (i.e. a parade, when visitors are over, around children, etc...). Dogs do not just "get over it." Force is more likely to intensify the problem, not make it better.

How do we Treat Fear and Fear-related Aggression?

Step One: Keep your Dog Feeling Safe

This step may mean avoiding situations where your dog has shown fear or avoided a particular interaction. Remember that in the human world, eye contact and handshakes are polite, but in the dog world, they are quite rude. Don't force your dog to interact with people if they're uncomfortable. You can purchase "Do Not Pet" collars and harnesses to send a clear message, and you can avoid high traffic areas.

Just as some dogs are afraid of people, others are afraid of other dogs or of the environment. For these dogs, it may be best to leave them at home with a pet sitter when you go on vacation, or avoid walks and find other ways meet your dog's exercise needs at home. Avoid dog parks and doggie daycares to reduce stressful and unpredictable interactions with other dogs.

Step Two: Establish a Safe Haven

A safe haven can be a crate, bed, or bedroom. It should be away from the front door and high traffic area. A door or gate to close off the area is a necessity. This area is off limits to all the scary things in your dog's world. Make sure good things always happen here, like special food dispensing and puzzle toys. Practice sending your dog here at least once a day for special treats, toys, or attentions. You can dim the lights, close the blinds, and play classical music or audiobooks or use a white noise machine to block out sounds. Make sure there is a comfortable resting area available and all the fun things that your dog likes. A dog appeasing pheromone such as an Adaptil Diffuser™ (Ceva) may help to create this relaxing environment.

For the dog that is fearful of unfamiliar people in your home, place them in their safe haven before your visitors arrive. Ask them to call or text ahead so that you are ready. You can also use this strategy for storms, fireworks, and other stressful events that are difficult to manage or avoid.

Step Three: Improve Communication

Finding ways to clearly communicate with your dog is important. Avoid punishing, reprimanding, or disciplining your dog when they are fearful or use aggression. Corrections, focusing on mistakes, and even yelling at your dog can increase fear and anxiety and the very behaviors you are trying to stop. These approaches often make you seem scary and unpredictable and doesn't address the root cause for your dog's behavior. This can contribute to suppressing early warning signs (growling) of your dog's distress and increase the risk of more severe aggression



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(lunging and snapping) without the warning growl. If your dog growls, listen and walk away or move them away from the cause. Take note of what was occurring before the growl to reduce the chance of escalation to a bite.

Step Four: Behavior Modification

Behavior modification is how we change emotional responses. Several different behavior modification techniques can be used to help fearful dogs. They all involve controlling the environment, and never pushing the dog over their fear threshold. Monitoring your dog's body language for signs of anxiety (ears back, tail tucked, head down, mouth closed, lip licking, and avoiding eye contact) is necessary. Monitoring helps you determine when to move forward in the process or stop so your dog has time to recover and return to a more relaxed emotional state.

All dogs that have shown aggression in the past (all dogs have the potential to bite) should be conditioned to wear a basket muzzle. This muzzle is often the first step in the behavior modification process. You can help your dog absolutely love wearing a muzzle if you go slow. Make sure that your dog always moves towards the muzzle and you do not force the muzzle upon your dog.

When it comes to specific fearful stimuli such as people, noises, other animals, and objects, there are different techniques that can be used to help your dog feel more comfortable. You can use the foundation behaviors of eye contact, hand targeting, and safe zone to facilitate the process.

What about Medications?

Yes, some dogs do need medications. Why? Because they cannot relax, focus, and learn new coping skills without them. Medications can help to increase the learning pathways in the brain and to improve the dog's overall emotional state. The brain is hardwired to create negative emotions when in an anxious or fearful state, and therefore many dogs have trouble focusing, learning, and relaxing when fearful or anxious. These are the dogs where medications can be beneficial. Medications are not a cure all and must accompany behavior modification and management to be successful. Remember, when we use medications, our goal is not to change the dog's personality or to sedate. Our goal is to increase their ability to learn and therefore increase their rate of forming positive associations with the scary trigger or environment.

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