

HELP FOR YOUR FEARFUL DOG

Fearful behavior is very difficult to change because avoidance behavior is powerfully reinforcing. In situations where a dog does not know what to do, a fearful dog will most easily switch to fear and avoidance. Lack of socialization is often a contributing factor. As humans know all too well, habits are very hard to break. Helping your dog transform from a fearful bundle of nerves into a confident and capable canine will take time and a lot of patience on your part. The results will be well worth your efforts.

SECRETS FOR SUCCESS

1) Don't reassure your fearful dog. Your soothing tone of voice indicates approval to your dog – "Mommy likes it when I act afraid of other dogs." Your dog will obviously continue to react fearfully if that is the behavior she is rewarded for. Instead, speak in a happy, confident voice – "Look! A dog is coming, how fun!" Your upbeat attitude goes a long way toward convincing your dog that the situation is safe.

2) Don't isolate your dog. It can be a natural reaction to want to protect your dog from the things that she is afraid of. The less a dog is introduced to an object, person or event that she is afraid of, the more fearful she will be in that situation. Keep introducing your dog to things gently but persistently. (See below)

3) Don't put your dog into fear-causing situations at a rate that is quicker than her coping abilities can handle. Instead find a safe distance to observe the thing that causes her anxiety and reward her for being brave enough to stick around. Gradually decrease the distance to the person, dog or object. Go slowly. You can chip away at fear by being careful but persistent.

4) Reinforce any behavior that is seen as moving forward or is less fearful than the last reaction to the same situation. This may be as minute as not hiding behind you or not withdrawing from the approach of a child. It is more difficult to notice and reward the absence of a behavior, so be aware!

5) If your dog responds to new situations with aggression, use a muzzle for the safety of others and ultimately for the safety of your dog.

6) Go slowly but do not let your dog become dependent upon flight behavior. If running away from stress is the only response your dog ever uses, she will never learn to access another response. This requires good judgment on your part. Have you invested enough time to adequately desensitize her to the person, dog or event? If so, keep her in the moment by asking her to sit or shake or by offering her a treat. If she learns to respond to a command in those situations, she cannot simultaneously retreat.

7) Remember that your dog is expert at reading your emotions. You may find that you become stressed in situations to which your dog has responded poorly. Practice remaining calm in the face of events that stress your dog.

8) Reward your dog for coping with her fear. This may mean merely maintaining position or being able to control an outburst. Be sure to notice these signs.

ACCEPTING PEOPLE

1) Enlist the help of a friend that is known to your dog. Put your dog on leash and have the friend enter your home and slowly approach to within five or six feet. It is important that your friend does not look at your dog. Have the friend stand at an angle to the dog and toss a treat in front of her. Repeat this until your dog is quite comfortable.

2) Your friend follows the same procedure but this time faces your dog but does not look at her.

3) Again the same, but your friend actually looks at your dog off and on. Eye contact can be very stressful for a fearful dog, so go slowly.

4) Finally, ask your friend to bend down and let your dog approach the treat in your friend's outstretched hand. Do not attempt to touch.

5) After your dog is very comfortable with the above four steps, have your friend slowly try to make contact with her. As your friend feeds her, also touch her on the neck or chest. Work on this many times.

6) Now ask your friend to go through the procedure above and intermittently move to other places in the room. Please be aware that any fast movements or sudden noises are likely to significantly frighten your dog even after a long period of accepting treats and/or contact.

At this point you are ready to enlist the help of a friend that is unknown to your dog and work through the same six steps above. She will probably be able to advance through the steps more quickly but do not be impatient.

NOTE: If using a child as the helper, the dog must be muzzled. For that reason, it is more desirable to enlist the help of an adult.

ACCEPTING NEW SITUATIONS

1) Put your fearful dog into many, many new situations a day. Ensure that each situation will be safe for her. For instance, you may let her smell the blow dryer that she has been fearful of while it is turned off and sitting on the floor. You can take her to the park to watch baby strollers, joggers and bikes go by from a distance that is comfortable for her. Gradually raise the bar by decreasing the distance. The technical term for this is desensitization.

2) Reward your dog for even the smallest of successes. It may take 15 minutes or more to investigate the blow dryer, but doing so is a wonderful success. Sitting still instead of running and hiding behind you as a stroller goes past is a great success.

3) Do not comfort your dog and do not reward inappropriate behavior such as fleeing the situation or becoming aggressive. If your dog has a bad reaction to a stimulus, quietly move away until you can regain control.

4) Do not attempt to force your dog through these steps and into situations that are fearful to her. Allow her to desensitize (become comfortable) at her own pace. Take small steps. Your dog did not become fearful overnight and she will not overcome her fear overnight either.

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