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The Fearful Dog

Dogs may display a variety of behaviors when they're afraid. A fearful dog will display certain body postures, including lowering his head, flattening his ears back against his head, and tucking his tail between his legs. He may also pant, salivate, tremble and/or pace. A frightened dog may try to escape, may show submissive behaviors (avoidance of eye contact, submissive urinating, rolling over to expose his belly), or he may freeze and remain immobile. Some dogs will bark and/or growl at the object that is causing their fear. In extreme cases of fearfulness a dog may be destructive (out of general anxiety or in an attempt to escape), or he may lose control of his bladder or bowels and, therefore, house soil.

Causes Of Fearful Behavior

Determining why your dog is fearful isn't always essential to treating the fearful behavior, although the reason for his fear will dictate the relative success of the treatment. A dog that is genetically predisposed to general fearfulness, or a dog that was improperly socialized during a critical stage in his development, will probably not respond as well to treatment as a dog that has developed a specific fear in response to a specific experience. It's essential, however, to first rule out any medical causes for your dog's fearful behavior. Your first step should be to take your dog to your veterinarian for a thorough medical evaluation.

What You Can Do

Most fears won't go away by themselves, and if left untreated, may get worse. Some fears, when treated, will decrease in intensity or frequency but may not disappear entirely. Once medical reasons have been ruled out, the first step in dealing with your dog's fearful behavior is to identify what triggers his fear. If he is afraid of startling noises see our handout: "Helping Your Dog Overcome The Fear Of Thunder And Other Startling Noises." If he is afraid of being left alone, see our handout: "Separation Anxiety." Most fears can be treated using desensitization and counter conditioning techniques, which require a lot of time and patience. You may need help from a professional animal behavior specialist to help you with these techniques

Desensitization

- Begin by exposing your dog to a very low level or small amount of whatever it is that's causing his fear. For example, if he is afraid of bicycles, start with a bicycle placed at a distance of 100 feet from your dog.
- Reward him for calm, non-fearful behavior in the presence of the bicycle. Gradually move the bicycle closer to him. As long as your dog remains relaxed, reward him with treats and praise. If at any point he becomes anxious, move the bicycle further away and proceed at a slower pace.
- When your dog can remain relaxed in the presence of a stationary bicycle, move the bicycle 100 feet away again, but have someone ride it slowly by him. Again, gradually increase the proximity of the slowly moving bicycle, rewarding your dog for remaining calm and relaxed. Repeat this procedure as many times as necessary, gradually increasing the speed of the moving bicycle.

- This process may take several days, weeks or even months. You must precede at a slow enough pace that your dog never becomes fearful during the desensitization process.

Counter Conditioning

Counter conditioning works best when used along with desensitization and involves pairing the fear stimulus with an activity or behavior incompatible with the fear behavior.

- Using the desensitization technique example described previously, while your dog is exposed to the bicycle, ask him to perform some obedience exercises, such as "sit" and "down." Reward him for obeying and continue to have him obey commands as the bicycle is moved closer to him.
- If your dog doesn't know any commands, teach him a few using treats and praise. Don't ever use punishment, collar corrections or scolding to teach him the commands, as the point of counter conditioning is for him to associate pleasant things with the thing that frightens him.

Realistic Expectations

Some of the things that frighten dogs can be difficult to reproduce and/or control. For example, if your dog is afraid of thunderstorms, he may be responding to other things that occur during the storm, such as smells, barometric pressure changes and/or changes in the light. During the desensitization process it's impossible for you to reproduce all of these factors. If your dog is afraid of men, you may work at desensitizing him, but if an adult man lives in your household and your dog is constantly exposed to him, this can disrupt the gradual process of desensitization.

When To Get Help

Because desensitization and counter conditioning can be difficult to do, and because behavior problems may increase if these techniques are done incorrectly, you may want to get professional, in-home help from an animal behavior specialist. It's important to keep in mind that a fearful dog that feels trapped or is pushed too far may become aggressive. Some dogs will respond aggressively to whatever it is that frightens them (see our handout: "Understanding Aggression In Dogs"). If your dog displays any aggressive behavior, such as growling, snarling, snapping or baring his teeth, stop all behavior modification procedures and seek professional help from an animal behavior specialist as soon as possible.

Consult With Your Veterinarian

Medication may be available that can help your dog feel less anxious for short time periods. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your dog. Don't attempt to give your dog any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting with your veterinarian. Animals don't respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for humans could be fatal to your dog. Drug therapy alone won't reduce fears and phobias permanently. In extreme cases, behavior modification and medication used together may be the best approach.

What Not To Do

- Don't punish your dog for being afraid. Punishment will only make him more fearful.
- Don't try to force your dog to experience the object or situation that is causing him to be afraid. For example, if he is afraid of bicycles and you force him to stand in place while bicycles whiz by, he'll probably become more fearful, rather than less fearful of bicycles.
- Never punish your dog after the fact for destruction or house soiling caused by anxiety or fear. Animals don't understand punishment after the fact, even if it's only seconds later. This kind of destruction or house soiling is the result of panic, not misbehavior. Punishment will do more harm than good.