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Fear of Noises and Places in Dogs

For an introduction to this topic please see our handout on 'Fears, Phobias and Anxiety'.

Why is my dog so frightened of loud noises such as thunder, firecrackers, and vehicles?

Fears and phobias can develop from a single experience (one event learning) or from continued exposure to the fearful stimulus. Although some dogs react with a mild fear response of panting and pacing, others get extremely agitated and may panic and/or become destructive. These dogs are experiencing a phobic response to the stimulus. These phobias may develop because of an inherent sensitivity to the stimulus (i.e., a genetic predisposition) or exposure to a highly traumatic experience associated with the stimulus (e.g., a carport collapsing on the dog in a windstorm). With multiple exposures to a fearful event, a dog may become more intensely reactive; receiving attention or affection by well-meaning owners who are trying to calm the dog down may actually intensify the response.



Over the first few years of life, there are a number of developmental stages when fears might arise. They might begin to arise as the sensitive period for socialization and the fear stages emerge between two and four months of age, may begin to emerge with increasing maturity (6 to 12 months of age) or may not emerge until behavioral maturity at 18 months to 3 years of age. These fears may slowly increase in intensity over the years, or may suddenly seem to intensify, especially if there has been a particularly unpleasant experience. However, fears that begin to emerge well into the adult or senior years might be related to medical problems that lead to painful conditions, altered mentation as might be associated with diseases that affect neurological function, declining senses, endocrine imbalances or cognitive dysfunction.

What can I do to prevent or reduce fears and phobias from arising?

This topic is discussed in some detail in Socialization and Fear Prevention. Factors that can influence fear development in dogs include the genetics of the individual (pet selection), positive early handling, understanding the developmental stages of dogs, understanding learning principles (see Reinforcement and Rewards, Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning, and Implementing Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning), exposing your dog to a wide variety of stimuli during the primary socialization period and ensuring positive outcome, avoiding a negative outcome, and working slowly to calm and settle pets when they are fearful or anxious (rather than to discipline or punish).

What can I do if my dog is fearful or phobic?

When interacting with a dog that is exhibiting fear and anxiety, there are two critical issues that need to be addressed. First, if there is any potential for danger or injury to the dog or others, then safety is an overriding concern. Your response to the dog is the second important factor since any anxiety, threats, or punishment (which might be understandable if you are worried or frustrated) are counterproductive because they will further aggravate your dog's fear and anxiety. Therefore, to achieve the desired outcome, you will need to control and train your dog with techniques that calm and settle. Before getting started see Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training, Handling and Food Bowl Exercises, Principles of Teaching and Training Dogs, Using Punishment Effectively, and Why Punishment Should Be Avoided.

Dogs that experience phobias often need professional intervention by a veterinary or applied animal behaviorist. These pets are usually at risk of harming themselves or the owner's property when faced with the stimulus, especially if their owners are not home. If the dog will be left alone in a situation where it may encounter the phobic stimulus, drug therapy may be needed to prevent injury and destruction (see Treating Fear of Storms and Fireworks in Dogs).

Is there any way I can treat my dog myself?

To begin, you must identify all stimuli that evoke the behavior. For gunshots, fireworks or a backfiring car, the stimulus might be quite obvious. However, for thunderstorms, it may be the darkening of the sky, the drop in the barometric pressure, or the high winds that occur prior to the storm. Or it may be the storm itself, with the rain, wind, lightening, static electricity, and thunder that provides the stimuli for the behavior. Some dogs even develop a phobia of going outdoors because of certain sights or sounds that you will need to identify.

In order to set up an effective retraining program you will also need to be able to reproduce the stimuli. Finding a means of reproducing and controlling the stimulus is one of the most difficult aspects of the retraining program. A recording or video might work best for thunderstorms. Unfortunately, as discussed, many dogs are afraid of other components of a storm that are difficult to recreate. Therefore it may be possible to treat some, but not all aspects of the phobic response. Recordings may be useful for desensitizing dogs to the sound of fireworks, and the visual stimuli can be minimized by confining the dog to a brightly lit room with light proof shutters or shades. For gunshots, recordings or a starter pistol set inside four or five nested cardboard boxes might be a way to reduce and control the stimulus. Sometimes, increasing the distance from the stimulus or finding some relatively soundproofed room to do the training might work.

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If a recording is used, you will first need to ensure that it does indeed reproduce the fear by exposing the dog to the recording at a level at which the fear response is exhibited. Then, to begin to desensitize the dog, you will need to begin retraining with the recording at a low enough level that it does not evoke the response and the dog is rewarded lavishly for good (non-fearful) behavior (desensitization).

Retraining should focus on the use of rewards and training the dog to lie quietly in a favorite resting area to receive rewards such as chew toys even before the stimulus (e.g., recording) is first used. In short, if you cannot get your pet to settle and calm before you begin these exposure exercises, you are not ready to begin the exposure training. You can teach your pet to settle and calm by using reward training, head halters and / or physical handling exercises (see Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training, Teaching Calm – SOFT and Handling Exercises, and TTouch®). By using a specific resting site for training, the site itself may help to provide comfort and security for the dog during exposure to stimuli. When the dog will

settle and relax in the area, the stimuli can be gradually introduced and the dog's favored rewards (as determined by reinforcer gradient) can be paired with each exposure to the recording (counter-conditioning). Gradually, the volume is increased so that the dog learns to tolerate the "storm." During training, be certain that the pet exhibits an appropriate behavioral response with each change in gradient of exposure. Your goal is to encourage calm and relaxed behavior, although playing with a food toy or favored chew would also be appropriate responses (response substitution).

Another reason why it is extremely difficult to overcome fears and phobias is that while you are attempting to desensitize and counter-condition, your dog is likely to be exposed to a recurrence of the actual event (e.g., a thunderstorm). At these times, your response can actually serve to aggravate the problem. You must be certain not to reinforce the fearful and phobic responses, as this just encourages your dog to seek out your attention during storms. Remember your goal is to teach your dog where to settle and how to relax during storms. On the other hand, getting angry or frustrated with your dog will only serve to increase the fear. Therefore, at first ignoring your dog may be best.

However, if the fear is too intense or there is the possibility of harm to your dog, you will need to have a plan for helping your dog settle until the training begins to take effect. Placing your dog in its favored resting area in a room or area that has been sound-proofed, applying a head halter if that has been used as a means of training and settling your dog, and playing some calming music may help to decrease the dog's reaction. There are also a variety of products that have been designed to reduce anxiety in other ways, such as a wrap (anxiety wrap) which exerts constant pressure, and a cape that reduces thunderstorm static (Storm Defender Cape™), although there is minimal data to support their efficacy at this time. Drug therapy and pheromones may also be useful in some cases (see Fears and Phobias – Storms and Fireworks – Immediate Guidelines).

Why would my dog become frightened of certain places?

Lack of early exposure to the sights, sounds, or even odors of a particular location, or one or more traumatic experiences associated with that location could lead to fear. If you get upset and frustrated by the dog's behavior, you might intensify or aggravate the dog's fear. Many dogs also learn that the intensity of their response will result in the removal from the situation.

For example, some dogs may be frightened of traveling in the car because they become car sick or because the car ride is always followed by an unpleasant experience (such as boarding or a veterinary visit). Your dog may also become fearful of the veterinary hospital if it is always associated with unpleasant experiences, or of a particular room or area of the house (such as a basement or a cage) if an unpleasant event has occurred in that area. Some dogs even become frightened of the outdoors because of unpleasant experiences that have occurred there.

How can I treat my dog's fear of places?

It is necessary to carefully observe your dog's response to attempt to determine what the triggering stimuli are, and to place the stimuli along a gradient. For example, the dog may walk into the garage okay, but begins to get agitated when approaching the car. Or, the dog may be okay approaching the car and only get upset when forced to get in.

"Begin with a dog that can be calmed on command in the absence of stimuli."

Desensitization and counter-conditioning are then used to retrain the dog. Begin with a dog that can be calmed on command in the absence of stimuli. The goal, before beginning the exposure is that a calm, positive state can be achieved consistently on command. Then train the dog using favored rewards, beginning with situations where the fear is very mild. For example, with fear of car rides, the dog might first be rewarded for approaching, settling and relaxing when it is 10 feet

from the car, with training slowly progressing to lying beside the car for favored rewards with no signs of fear. A leash and head halter may help to keep your dog focused and to more effectively achieve the desired behavior. Favored rewards (based on reinforcer assessment) saved exclusively for this training can help the dog make positive associations with the car. Next progress to sitting in the car and relaxing for favored rewards. While encouraging your dog to enter the car for favored treats or toys would work best, some very mild encouragement or lifting might be appropriate if the fear has become sufficiently mild. However, the session should not end until the dog is relaxed and taking treats or playing with a favored chew or toy. Further desensitization and counter-conditioning would progress to training with the door closed, training with the motor on, putting the car into gear, backing in and out of the driveway and going for short trips. Although the goal is to always remain at or below the threshold, in practice, if your dog is being exposed to a mildly fearful stimulus, it may settle with continued exposure (flooding).

As long as the session ends with a calm or happy dog, you should be ready for repeating that level of exposure or gradually moving to a higher intensity stimulus. Dogs that are crate trained and those that are harness trained may feel more secure if trained to wear a seatbelt harness or travel in their own crates. Drugs and pheromones might help to improve success (see below). It is important to allow the dog to be relaxed and settled not only at the end of the session but also between sessions. Repetition of training when the dog is still agitated will make the dog more sensitive rather than less.

How do I deal with fear of the veterinary office?

For the dog that is fearful of the veterinary office, again it is first necessary for you to control and calm your dog in the absence of any fear evoking stimuli. A head halter can help to ensure that your dog learns and focuses, and neither escapes nor injures itself should the fear become too excessive. If this does occur, you are progressing too quickly in your training; remember the goal is to proceed slowly and always end on a positive note. For veterinary clinic fears, you might begin to travel by car or foot in the direction of the veterinary clinic, driving past the veterinary clinic or into the parking lot for your initial desensitization and counter-conditioning. Again, your dog's favored rewards should be identified and saved exclusively for this training.

Progress up the walkway, through the door, into the reception area, and ultimately interact with staff, all in a calm and positive manner. The more the dog is relaxed and enjoys the experience the faster you are likely to progress. Additional stimuli such as veterinary instruments (e.g., stethoscope, lights), staff uniforms, the scale or the examination table would also be steps through which it would be ideal to progress. For some dogs, it might take multiple visits with only minimal increments of increased intensity, while other dogs, once they settle and take rewards, may be able to progress through a few of these steps at the same visit.

Ultimately, training should progress to the examination area, and to some brief handling. Desensitization and counter-conditioning programs will generally be successful if the owner has the time, patience and understanding to proceed slowly. However, a difficult hurdle to overcome in any program to reduce fear and anxiety of the veterinary clinic occurs if the pet needs to be exposed to the clinic environment or staff and is not yet through the training program. In these cases, leash and head halter or muzzle control (to prevent escape and possible injury) and sedation or anesthesia to perform procedures would be warranted (see Veterinary Visits/Examinations – Desensitization/Reducing Fear).

Might drugs be helpful?

For dogs that are excessively fearful, phobic, or anxious, drugs might be helpful to reduce the state of anxiety and help the dog more quickly cope with the situation. While drugs may reduce anxiety in general, behavior modification is needed to help the dog adapt to the specific stimuli that are leading to the fear. Anti-anxiety drugs such as the benzodiazepines might work for situational anxieties since they take a very short time to reach efficacy and wear off fairly quickly.

However, there can be a rebound effect as they wear off, with a resultant increase in anxiety. In some cases, anti-anxiety drugs may result in disinhibition, so that a dog that is fearful may lose their inhibitions and become aggressive. Some anti-anxiety drugs may have inconsistent effects ranging from anxiety relief and muscle relaxation to sedation to increased agitation. Buspirone (which is nonsedating but might also disinhibit), Adaptil™ pheromone spray, and natural products such as melatonin might also help. Perhaps the most successful use of drug treatment might be to use an antidepressant to help control anxiety and reduce outbursts; however, these can take months to achieve their effect and other drugs may need to be used concurrently for more immediate relief. When using medication it is possible that the lessons learned may not transfer to the non-medicated state and the problem behavior might return. Therefore, gradual dose reductions might be recommended to determine whether the medication can be successfully withdrawn and if not, what would be the lowest effective medication dose.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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