

Fear and Anxiety



Fear and anxiety are common causes of behavioural problems in dogs. The problematic behaviour/s may simply be symptoms. Treating the symptoms, rather than the cause, is not likely to provide satisfaction in the long-term.

Fear and anxiety can be debilitating for the sufferer, adversely affecting their quality of life. The resulting symptoms or behavioural problems may also adversely affect the quality of life of the dog owner, their neighbours and the broader community.

It has long been debated as to whether or not dogs experience emotions at all. Evidence suggests that while dogs may not experience the range of emotions that people experience; they do experience the basic emotions of fear, anger, anxiety, frustration and happiness, possibly more intensely than we do.

The following is a list of potentially helpful considerations in treating anxiety and fear in dogs:

Medication

Medication, designed to assist the brain and body's chemical/hormonal performance can be considered. Supporting behavioural programmes may provide assistance in the dog learning alternative means of coping with stressful situations.

Anxiety as a result of poor experience or a lack of suitable experience during the critical development phases is often resistant to behavioural therapy. Medication may reduce the dog's anxiety to a level where new learning can occur, allowing behavioural programmes to be more effective. In some cases behavioural programmes will provide the dog with sufficient coping strategies to a level where the need for medication can be reduced or eliminated.

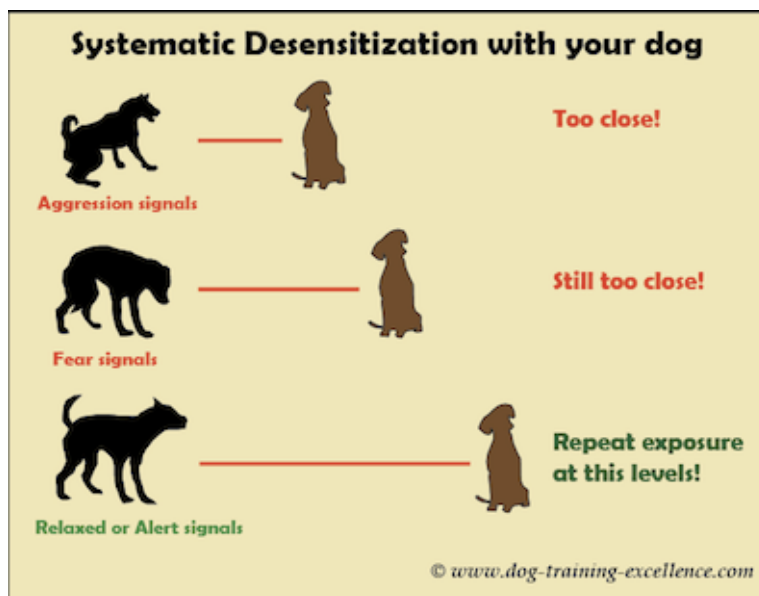
Advice on medications can be sought from a practicing Veterinarian, preferably, a Veterinary Behaviouralist or Veterinarian with a specific interest in behaviour.

As a general approach, I recommend commencing behavioural therapy prior to drug therapy. Behavioural strategies should be implemented and practiced consistently for a minimum period of three weeks. A further assessment of measurable improvements or lack thereof in the dog's condition will include consideration of medication therapy.

Systematic Desensitisation

Systematic desensitisation involves *gradually* exposing the dog to the fear-eliciting stimulus. Initially, the dog experiences the stimulus at a *low* intensity. Commonly, lowering the intensity will include increasing the distance from the stimulus, reducing the volume and/or movement of the stimulus.

Repeated exposure at a lowered intensity where the dog is aware and mildly aroused, but not reactive, will result in a reduction of the dog's fear response and the level of intensity can then be increased slightly.



Repeated exposure at the new level of intensity will again eventually result in the fear-eliciting stimulus no longer inducing stress in the dog, and a new slightly increased level of intensity is introduced. Gradually, the dog learns to cope with increasing levels of intensity until the fear response is no longer elicited.

It is imperative for the success of desensitisation programmes that the dog is not overly stressed due to a level of intensity that induces fearful reactivity. When the dog is experiencing anything more than mild stress, there is an increased risk of producing further sensitisation instead of *desensitisation*.

The tie-up or restraint exercise utilises systematic desensitisation to assist in the development of independence, which allows the dog to feel safe and comfortable when left alone. See separate information document.

The owner and trainer must exercise patience; the dog can only progress via success. Proceeding too fast or too soon, for the individual dog, will result in sensitisation and will further hamper progression.

Counter-Conditioning

Systematic desensitisation is often implemented in combination with counter-conditioning for increased rates of success in the reduction of fear responses.

Counter-conditioning involves changing the emotional association in the dog's mind to the fear-eliciting stimulus. On presentation of the stimulus, the dog is provided with a pleasant experience such as a desirable food treat or an enjoyable game. Repeated pairings in this way will result in the dog feeling a positive emotion due to the prediction of a pleasant event, on the presentation of the previously fear-eliciting stimulus.



Calming events, such as massage, have also been effective in counter-conditioning procedures.

Behavioural programmes utilising systematic desensitisation and counter-conditioning are commonly used to treat fears and phobias. Less intense fears can be treated with good rates of success. However, while the combined techniques can also be successful in treating more intense fears, it can be a long, hard road for the dog owner. Improvements will be small and won't happen overnight. Many owners give-up before any great improvement has been achieved. It is not easy for the owner to maintain high levels of consistency and to resist the temptation to punish the dog's fear responses, particularly if the dog's fear response is aggression. To complicate matters further, the owner has to avoid subjecting the dog to experiences of intensity that will produce sensitisation.

Follow this link for a great demonstration of counter-conditioning by Dr Sophia Yin:

<https://drsophiayin.com/videos/entry/counter-conditioning-a-dog-to-blowing-in-face/>

Training

Training of tricks or basic obedience exercises with techniques employing positive reinforcement is thought to assist the dog by changing their outlook or belief systems. Anxiety is often the result of the dog experiencing a lack of ability to predict and control outcomes. Reward based training programmes contradict this experience and enhance the dog's belief and confidence in being able to effect the world around him.

Clicker training procedures for teaching tricks seems to be particularly helpful. Instructions are readily available on the Internet. Try Karen Pryor's "101 Things to do With a Box".

Thundershirt

Thundershirts have been shown to provide relief to fearful and anxious dogs. Anecdotal evidence leans towards success in situations of mild to moderate stress.

The elasticised shirt wraps firmly around the dog's torso. It provides calmness during times of stress.



Take a measurement of the dog's chest at the largest point, just behind his armpits. Thundershirts come in a range of sizes and can be purchased at pet shops or on-line.

<http://www.thundershirt.com/>

Husher Muzzle

Husher muzzles act in a similar way to Thundershirts in that they are an elasticised muzzle. They were designed to reduce barking in dogs by making it less comfortable

for the dog to bark. However, as a side effect, barking was also reduced due to a reduction of anxiety in the dog.

Dogs are able to lap water whilst wearing the muzzle and can still bite if so inclined. However, the muzzle does reduce the dog's ability to pant and, so, reduce their body temperature. Accordingly, it is not recommended to leave a dog alone with the muzzle fitted. If the dog becomes over-excited or is highly active, he could easily collapse from heat exhaustion. <http://www.husher.com.au/>

Kongs and Other Home-Along Toys

Kongs have been proving successful in reducing general anxiety levels in dogs.

Extracting food from Kong type toys or food puzzles simulates the scavenging type behaviour that dogs employ naturally to gain their nutrition.

The licking and chewing action releases serotonin, the "feel good" hormone.



The more time required attaining and consuming daily food rations, the less time available for engaging in other less attractive behaviour.

Throw the dog food bowl away!

Encouraging puppies and dogs to regularly eat and chew on their kong type toys will also create a good habit of chewing toys rather than other more valuable items.

Scatter Feeding

Scatter feeding is another means of providing stimulation through food consumption. The dog's bowl of dry biscuits is taken to a suitable area such as a paved courtyard, balcony or grassed yard. The biscuits are scattered over the area for the dog to search out. It will take some time for the dog to find all of the biscuits and he'll never be quite sure when he has found the last one and will continue searching, in the hope of getting lucky.

Adaptil Dog Appeasing Pheromones (DAP)

The hormones released by a lactating bitch are thought to have a calming effect on dogs. Again, anecdotal evidence suggests some success in situations of mild to moderate stress only.

Adaptil produce a collar infused with the DAP that can be worn full- time by the dog or during times of increased stress. It should be fitted to the dog at least 20 minutes prior to exposure to the stressful situation.

A plug-in diffuser is also available.

These products can be purchased from your Veterinarian or on-line.

<https://www.vetnetsupplies.com/shop/adaptil-for-dogs/>

Diet and Nutrition

Diets lowered in protein are thought to be helpful in reducing stress levels in dogs. Dr Bruce's Vet's All Natural dog muesli as a base for the anxious dog's diet may assist. <http://www.vetsallnatural.com.au/>

Dogs suffering from chronic fear and stress may benefit from supplementation with fish oils containing omega-3 fatty acids.

Herbal supplements such as passionflower, kava kava extract and valerian-lemon balm, have been found to have an anti-anxiety effect in dogs and humans.

Vitamin B supplements can be considered.

Herbal and dietary changes can produce adverse side effects if not correctly dosed and balanced and must therefore, be under the supervision of a Veterinarian.

Play

The emotional excitement and joy experienced by the dog during genuine play are incompatible with fear. Play is extremely useful in treating mild to moderate fears. Play enhances a dog's confidence and willingness to take risks, which is in opposition to the wariness, anxious vigilance and inhibition that is so commonly associated with fearful emotions.



Exercise

Benefits of daily exercise include a heightened sense of wellbeing and an improved ability to cope with stress. Exercise should include taking the dog to different areas, not the same on every occasion.

Hyper-Excitement

Over-excitement can be an indication of emotional stress. Of course, dogs will be excited in anticipation of certain events such as dinner, going for a walk, visitors arriving, etc. Hyper- excitement does not refer to a happy dog anticipating a pleasant experience. Hyper-excitement generally involves much whining and activity and an inability to control or regulate their emotional state.

Sadly, we often misinterpret a dog that is ridiculously excited to see us on our return home, believing that the dog really loves us a lot! In response, we often encourage the behaviour.



We can help the dog to calm down in exciting scenarios by making the situation less exciting. For example, on arriving home, remain calm, greet the dog in a relaxed voice, but go about your own business. Put the kettle on for a cuppa or switch on

the television. Walk away from the dog. Take care that the silent treatment is not frightening the dog. Use a calm and confident voice to reassure that there is no trouble afoot; it's just not that exciting.

Some dogs turn somersaults when they know dinner is imminent. Try going through the motions of preparing the dog's dinner but at the point when you would present the

food to the dog, place it up on the kitchen bench instead. Go and watch television or make a phone call. The dog will initially be perplexed and somewhat frustrated. Once he has calmed down and no longer expecting the food, approach the food bowl to get it for him but again return it to the bench just as you are about to present it to the dog. Repeat the process numerous times until the dog's level of excitement when you have his food bowl is greatly reduced.

The aim is to disappoint the dog's expectations that arouse the hyper-excitement.

Variety - Avoid Routines and Patterns

When life's events are highly predictable because life follows an absolute routine or pattern, the dog may become distressed when the routine or pattern changes even slightly. Furthermore, the dog now has reason to worry those routines and patterns might be broken at some point in the future.

- Vary the time of day that the dog is walked, fed, trained, allowed indoors etc.
- Vary the direction of the walk.
- Vary the location of meals, the food source.
- Introduce toys stuffed with food and scatter feeding.
- Vary where the dog sleeps.
- Vary the family member who walks, feeds, and trains the dog.

Crate Training

Many people may see crate training as "caging" their dog and feel that it is cruel or unfair. In fact, the large majority of dogs love crates; they feel safe and secure, enclosed in their own little haven. Dogs experiencing anxiety will commonly seek a safe haven such as under furniture or in corners; these dogs will greatly appreciate a crate.

There are a variety of crates on the market including molded plastic models with wire doors, entirely wire crates and canvas versions with zipper openings.

Given that the anxious dog is looking for an enclosed safe haven, you could cover a wire crate with a sheet or towel to make it feel more enclosed.

The crate should be just big enough for the dog to stand up and lift his head. Dogs can turn around in very tight circles to get comfortable. A crate that is too large will lose the enclosed, safe haven feeling.

To establish the crate as a pleasant experience and place to be, it is a good idea to place it in the most social area of the home, next to your bed or chair, with the crate door left open. Place the dog's favourite bedding and toys within and consider adding a food-stuffed kong or smearing peanut butter inside the crate. With a little luck the dog will decide for himself that he likes being in the crate. When you first attempt to close the door of the crate with the dog inside, stay right next to the crate

with the dog. At this stage, the dog is probably not scared of being in the crate but maybe feeling anxious that you might leave him and he won't be able to follow; so stay with him!

As the dog's experience and comfort grows, you can start to gradually move a little away from the crate. The first time you go out of sight of the dog in the crate, it will only be for a split second before you reappear and then this time frame can ever so gradually be increased at the dog's rate of comfort.

Avoid sending the dog into a panic as this will most likely result in sensitisation and a strong dislike of the crate.

Ensure that the dog is not kept in the crate for excessive lengths of time. He can sleep in the crate overnight and he can spend several hours in it during the day, but he still needs daily exercise, mental stimulation and social interaction.

See separate document for "Crate Training".

Anxiety and fear are cruel emotions. Don't let any dog suffer - seek assistance.

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