



Jasper County Animal Rescue League and Humane Society
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Fearful Behavior in Dogs

Dogs may display fear in a variety of ways. Most fearful dogs express their fear through certain body postures like lowering their tail, crouching low to the ground, or holding their ears back. Other responses include submissive urination, rolling on their back, losing control of their bladder and bowels or growling and barking at the fearful stimulus. Some dogs may try to escape the fearful situation while others may freeze and become immobile. Panting, salivation and trembling are other signs of fear.

What can I do?

If your dog's behavior has suddenly changed then the first step is to take him to a veterinarian for a check up to rule out any medical causes. Some dogs become fearful when their hearing or vision abilities have diminished.

If your dog is genetically predisposed to general fearfulness or if he was not properly socialized during critical periods of his development, behavior modification techniques may not be very successful.

Most fears can be resolved by a combination of desensitization and counter conditioning. This process is usually quite lengthy, but if done properly can be quite successful. Desensitization is the process by which you expose the dog to very low levels of the feared object and gradually increase the level as long as the dog remains calm. Counter conditioning is replacing an inappropriate response like fear with an appropriate one like sit. Listed below is a general outline of the process:

- 1) Identify what causes the fearful behavior
- 2) Start with the fear stimulus at a very low level or at a safe distance from the dog. A safe distance is where the dog is showing no fearful signs.
- 3) Reward the dog for calm behavior in the presence of the fearful stimulus. Ask the dog for some commands like sit, shake, or play ball to keep the dog's attention focused on you.
- 4) Gradually move the object closer to the dog. Continue to praise and treat the dog for calm behavior. If at any point the dog becomes fearful, move the object further away and start again at a much slower pace.
- 5) Once the dog is comfortable with the stimulus, start the process over and make any slight variations. For example if your dog is afraid of men try and introduce a man with

sunglasses on.

6) Be realistic; this process may take weeks or months. It is very important that you proceed at a slow enough pace so the dog does not become fearful. Some fears may not disappear but only lessen in intensity or frequency.

What NOT to do:

- Never punish either verbally or physically. This will only make the fear worse.
- Do not comfort or coddle your dog when he is acting fearful. Your dog could view your soothing words as reinforcement for the fearful behavior.
- Do not force your dog to endure a situation he views as fearful. This may make him more fearful and he may become aggressive in order to escape.
- Do not ignore fearful behavior. Without treatment the behavior will not go away and may become worse.

A Word about Thunder and Fireworks:

- Desensitization and counter conditioning may work, but it is hard to replicate all the factors like smell or barometric pressure.
- You can provide your dog with a safe place to go. Usually the dog must decide where that place is otherwise he may feel trapped. If your dog likes to hide under the bed, provide access and place a soft blanket and food there. Make the safe place as positive as possible.
- Some dogs don't like to hide, but would rather stay near you. Let the dog follow you, but do not attempt to comfort or coddle him by saying "It's okay." This will only reinforce the fearful behavior. Instead just act normal like it is no big deal. You may want to try and ask the dog to do some obedience commands. Reward him for desired behavior.
- Before the dog becomes anxious, try to distract him by playing fetch. You may not be able to keep his attention as the storm builds, but each time you will delay the fear a little longer.
- If your dog is in danger of injuring himself, talk to your veterinarian about medications to make the dog less anxious while you work on the techniques outlined above.