



Tips For Helping the Fearful Dog

Most fears will not go away by themselves and may get worse if left untreated. After ruling out medical issues, the first step to helping your dog is determining what triggers her fearful behavior. Most fears can be addressed using a combination of management and training. Learn to read your dog's body language so that you can learn her triggers and be an advocate for her in stressful situations.

Signs of fear in dogs

- muscles tensed
- ears back
- dilated pupils/eyes like saucers
- avoiding eye contact
- yawning
- puffed-out upper lips
- panting/excessive salivating
- shaking
- barking or growling at fearful stimuli
- weight shifted backwards
- tail tucked
- body held in a crouch/frozen body posture
- closed mouth
- tongue flicking
- looking away
- pacing/trying to find an escape route

What you can do

It is important to manage your dog's environment to eliminate her exposure to frightening situations. This involves being an advocate for your dog by explaining her fears to new people and not putting her in situations where she is likely to come across the fearful stimuli. Help your dog experience success and develop confidence in her life through basic manners exercises and "Say Please" training. The key is to help your dog become more confident in everyday interactions at a pace at which she is comfortable. One option is to talk with a trainer about attending a small Basic Manners group class in order to exposure her to new dogs, people and situations at a low level.

10 Recommendations for Guardians of Fearful Dogs

1. Be patient – it can take weeks, months, years for a dog to overcome their fears
2. Commit to helping your dog by putting in the time and effort to treat her fears
3. Don't force your dog into situations that you know induce fear
4. Be open to the variety of techniques that may help her overcome her fears
5. Resolve medical issues first– behavior modification and training will not be effective if medical care is needed
6. Be gentle, positive, and kind
7. Never use punishment
8. Protect your dog from scary situations
9. Accept that many fearful dogs never become gregarious, go-with-the-flow types
10. Love your dog for who she is!

Training

The effectiveness of training will depend on many things including, but not limited to, your dog's age, socialization history, exposure to the fearful stimuli, and the amount of time she has been practicing the fearful behavior. Some fears, when treated, will decrease in intensity or frequency but may not disappear entirely. When training, it is

important to work below your dog's fear threshold at all times. Since desensitization must be done slowly and systematically, it is helpful to speak with a professional dog trainer to develop a plan for you and your dog.

Utilizing desensitization training

Desensitization is a structured way of repeatedly exposing your dog to something she fears, but starting at a low enough level that fear is not induced.

This training begins by exposing your dog to a very low level or small amount of the fearful stimuli. For example, you would start with your dog on leash and far enough away from the fearful stimuli so that she doesn't exhibit any of the signs of fear listed above. You want to reward your dog for calm, non-fearful behavior in the presence of that stimuli. Over several sessions you will gradually approach the stimuli one step at a time. As long as your dog remains relaxed, reward her with treats and praise. If at any point she becomes anxious, step back until she settles and then "jackpot" reward her for relaxing in the presence of the stimuli at that greater distance ("jackpot" reward means to provide several tasty treats, in a row, one at a time). Dogs do not generalize well. That means that just because you desensitize your dog that is fearful of men to one man doesn't mean she has overcome her fear of all men. It is important to conduct this training with different versions of the fearful stimuli and in a variety of settings.

Utilizing counterconditioning training

Classical counterconditioning consists of pairing what frightens your dog with something else incompatible with a fear response. Eventually, she will learn that what she fears predicts things she loves.

Counterconditioning works best when used with desensitization training. Counterconditioning training pairs the fear stimuli with an activity or behavior incompatible with fearful behavior. For example, using the protocol outlined under desensitization training, you would ask for a "sit" in proximity to the fearful stimuli and reward that instead of only rewarding non-fearful responses. With a dog who LOVES to play fetch you may play a mini-fetch game near the scary stimuli. Some of the stimuli that create a fearful response in your dog may be impossible to duplicate in order to use training. This is where management of your dog's environment is most helpful.

What NOT to do

- Do not punish your dog for showing any signs of fear including growling/barking/lunging at a scary person/object. It is hard not to react to your dog's reaction, however, scolding or punishing your dog for exhibiting a normal fear response will not reduce her fear and will only teach her to be more fearful of that stimuli.
- Do not force your dog to experience the object or situation that causes the fear response. Instead, use the training above to help your dog create a new and better association with the fearful stimuli.
- Never punish your dog after the fact for destruction or house soiling. She is not capable of understanding after-the-fact punishment. If destructive behavior or house soiling is due to fear she is experiencing a panic attack that she is not in control of and punishment will damage your relationship and create more anxiety.

We Can Help! The Training and Behavior Department at the Humane Society of Western Montana has a variety of resources available to help you and your pets live in harmony! The Humane Society has several dog trainers and a behaviorist on staff to provide affordable group and private training lessons and free behavior consultations.

- Contact Jean, our Behaviorist for a free pet behavior consultation by emailing behavior@myhswm.org or calling the Behavior Helpline at (406) 549-9295.
- Contact Mariah, a Certified Professional Dog Trainer, to inquire about private lessons or a group training class. Email outreach@myhswm.org or call (406) 549-HSWM.
- Check out our website at www.myhswm.org for a complete listing of dog classes, rates and additional information.

