

Adopting a Fearful Dog

Fearful behavior in dogs is a very common, yet misunderstood issue that many owners face. Fearful reactions can range from very mild to very severe; some dogs shut down in the face of their triggers while others become agitated and reactive. Behavior is complicated, so fearfulness is often due to a combination of multiple factors.

How Do We Know When a Dog is Afraid?

Dog Body Language

Dogs are very good at communicating their feelings through body language. When adopting a fearful dog, you will need to learn to recognize body language cues so you know when your dog is uncomfortable and can then remedy the situation. As you get to know your dog, you should be able to identify the signals she displays when she is uncomfortable. Some body language cues are more noticeable than others. Here is a list of some common signs of fear in dogs:

Body Language of Fear in Dogs



Slight Cowering

Major Cowering

More Subtle Signs of Fear & Anxiety



Moving in Slow Motion
walking slow on floor

Acting Sleepy or Yawning
when they shouldn't be tired

Hypervigilant
looking in many directions

More Subtle Signs of Fear & Anxiety



Licking Lips
when no food nearby

Panting
when not hot or thirsty

Brow Furrowed, Ears to Side



Suddenly Won't Eat
but was hungry earlier

Moving Away

Pacing

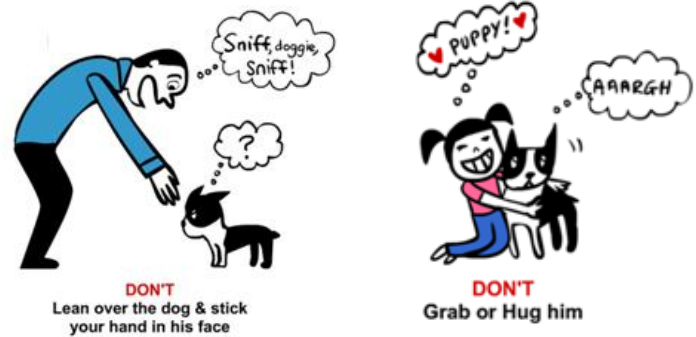
Other signs of fear include:

- Pinned ears
- Whites of eyes showing
- Shaking off (when the dog is not wet)
- Low or tucked tail
- Tense body or trembling
- Tension around eyes and mouth
- Lip curls/showing teeth
- Snapping or biting

Human Body Language

We know this handout is supposed to be talking about dogs. However, our body language can affect how a dog responds to us. The following behaviors can stress out an already fearful or anxious dog:

- Leaning over the dog
- Putting your hand in the dog's face
- Petting a dog on the top of the head
- Direct eye contact
- Reaching into the dog's personal space



Luckily, there are many ways that we can make a dog more comfortable using our body language. This includes:

- Staying outside the dog's personal space
- Letting the dog approach in his own time
- Avoiding eye contact
- Keeping your side to the dog
- Petting under the chin if the dog comes up to you with relaxed body language
- Crouching down or sitting without bending over the dog

THE CORRECT WAY:



- * No Eye contact
- * Let the dog approach you in his own time
- * Keep either your **SIDE** or **BACK** towards the dog (non-threatening posture)



- * Pet or stroke him on the **SIDE** of his face or body. Or on his back.

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What to Avoid When Training a Fearful Dog

Corrective or Punitive Training

The most important thing to keep in mind when training a fearful dog is that using any type of aversive or corrective training will be counter-productive.

Think of it this way – let's say you are afraid of spiders. You go to a therapist, who places a spider near you and then slaps you when you scream. To avoid being slapped, you stop screaming. The symptom (screaming) is gone, but you're still afraid of spiders. Regardless, at some point, your emotions will override your suppressed behavior and you will again outwardly show your fear of spiders.

In the same way, correcting a dog for growling or lunging toward something he is afraid of does nothing to diminish the dog's fear. You may suppress the behavior, but at some point it will return, and in many cases the behavior that resurfaces is even worse than it was when you started.

Flooding

Some people try to "get their dogs used to" a scary thing. They do this by exposing them to the scary thing non-stop over a long period of time. Forcing your dog to be around something that really scares her without giving her the opportunity to get away will only make her fear worse. It may also increase the likelihood of unwanted behaviors like showing teeth, growling, or even biting.

Desensitization must be done gradually and carefully, so that it is always a positive experience. You cannot force the process, and your dog must be given the option to retreat whenever she is feeling overwhelmed. This is essential to maintaining your dog's mental health as well as her trust in you.

How Do You Treat Fearful Behavior?

How you modify fearful behavior in your dog will depend greatly on the extent of the dog's fear. There are several options for how you go about working on the behavior. If you feel your dog's behavior is extreme, your best bet would be to work closely with a professional trainer who has experience working with fearful dogs.

Reward-Based Obedience Classes

For mild cases, simple confidence-building in the form of learning commands can help some fearful dogs blossom.

- Reward-based classes set the dog up for success and builds confidence and a trusting bond with the owner.
- These classes may not be appropriate for dogs who are so fearful or reactive that they are unable to focus on learning anything new.

Classical Counter-Conditioning and Desensitization

This means that you are changing your dog's emotions from negative to positive. To put it simply, when your dog encounters a scary thing and is remaining calm she gets lots of tasty treats. When the scary thing leaves, she stops getting treats. Eventually she learns that the scary thing approaching = good, and the scary thing leaving = not as good.

The most important thing to keep in mind when implementing this process, it to go at your dog's pace. If at any time she is so stressed that she refuses treats, you have progressed too quickly and need to take a few steps back. Some specific sub-types of this training are:

- Behavioral Adjustment Training (BAT) created by Grisha Stewart
- Click-for-Calm created by Emma Parsons
- Controlled Unleashed created by Leslie McDevitt

Environmental Management

For some fearful dogs, training will improve their behavior, but only to a certain extent. After that plateau has been reached, you will need to manage the dog's environment in such a way that keeps the dog feeling secure. This could include things like:

- Maintaining a consistent schedule so your dog always knows what to expect.
- Avoiding specific situations that you know make your dog uncomfortable.
- Utilizing over-the-counter or prescription medications to ease your dog's anxiety.

Escape Risks

Dogs that are fearful are often driven to escape the “scary” situation. If they seem to be prone to wanting to escape you can:

- Leash walk only, or always be outside with them in a fenced in yard.
- Grab onto their leash while opening car doors.
- Give them an area to stay, like a crate, so that they are safely confined when you enter the house.
- Martingale collars will prevent the dog from backing out of the collar while on a leash.

Final Thoughts

Adopting a fearful dog is certainly not for everyone. However, with the right combination of training, management, and understanding, most fearful dogs are able to thrive with their new families. CAHS strives to make every adoption work; however, we understand that sometimes it just isn't the right fit. Owning a fearful dog can be a lot to manage and we understand that in some cases, the need to surrender is the best option.

For more personalized behavior help, CAHS offers a free Behavior Helpline. Call or email the Behavior Department.

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