



Fears and Phobias

Dogs can be scared of pretty much anything. If they are well socialised as young pups the list will be short, but rescue dogs, dogs who missed out valuable learning early on, or who have just had a bad experience with something, can all get scared of sounds, objects, people seemingly at random. If your dog is worried by something he might bark, growl, back away (or pull towards the things if on lead), run and hide, run around anxiously, repeatedly lick himself, yawn, lip lick, shake himself, flatten his ears, tuck his tail or a multitude of other reactions. Common fears are:

- Children,
- People of different race, size, physical shape, gait, or who have beards, wearing hats, carrying strange objects etc
- People entering the dogs home
- Other dogs and farm animals
- Traffic, aeroplanes, roadworks
- Fireworks & thunder

With any fearful dog the treatment is broadly the same and generally two-fold, with the exception of fear aggression which should always be addressed through professional help. If your dog has bitten through fear or is reacting aggressively to somebody or something, please stop reading this and call a professional behaviourist instead. For day to day worries though, the two approaches, often used together are:

1. to gradually introduce your dog to a very low level of the scary thing, and increase the proximity/ volume very slowly, (de-sensitisation)
2. to teach good associations with the scary thing by offering treats, exciting play and praise whenever the thing is encountered. (counter-conditioning)

There are a few golden rules:

- Always start by finding your dogs tolerance level first. For example, if she is scared of traffic, how far away do you have to be before she stops being worried by it? How quiet do the fireworks have to be (played on an effects CD) before a fear reaction is noticed? This is where you start – reward the dog for being calm where it feels safe, and gradually increase intensity from there. If at any point your dog becomes worried as you increase, you have gone too far – go back to the previous level and wait until your dog is confident to progress.
- With children and unfamiliar people, ask them not to directly look at or approach the dog. The dog will be more confident if the person is turned side on. If you see someone approaching that you think your dog will worry about either avoid them entirely or ask your

dog to sit and focus on you for a food reward as the person passes. Give plenty of space where you can.

- Comforting your dog if they are scared will NOT cause it to be more scared or reinforce the fears. You can make a dog fearful of something by reacting scared yourself, but you cannot make it more fearful or prevent it getting over the fear by offering comfort and reassurance.
- If appropriate, use your body to block your dog from what he is scared of, use your arms to block unwanted approaches from other dogs and children. Keep your voice and body relaxed – tension in your voice or posture, taking a tighter hold on the lead, or saying ‘uh oh!’ will only cause the fear to heighten.
- Never punish a dog for being scared – this will only confirm to the dog that he is right to be scared of whatever it is, and will compound the problem.
- ‘Flooding’ - where you over expose the dog to whatever it is scared off to the point where it learns to stop being worried (e.g. making him sit right next to a busy road to overcome a fear of traffic) should NOT be used unless being managed by a professional behaviourist – it is rarely effective and can cause enormous damage even in safe hands. Imagine taking a dog scared of children into a busy school playground.... Dangerous and counter-productive.

Good quality gentle and watchful socialisation is so important – and particularly effective in young puppies who have yet to learn the fear response. With all dogs though, try and expose your dog to as many new things as you can on an ongoing basis, watch carefully for fearful reactions, and only ever go as far (or as close) as your dog can handle. Regular limited and controlled exposure to something scary will go a long way to helping overcome fear but takes time and patience. One bad experience can set you back a long way so be your dog’s eyes and ears and be ready to get the dog to focus on you, and reward him well for doing so if something scary comes along unexpectedly. If you cannot avoid something (for example a sudden firework display in next doors garden), find a way to minimise the impact – e.g. confine the dog somewhere safe with you, minimise the outside noise by shutting doors and windows, closing curtains, putting the radio on loud etc, and reassure the dog calmly.

It can take time, and definitely effort, to overcome fears, but it is so worth it in the long run. A stressed dog is upsetting for both you and the dog – a little effort, time and patience can go a long way to help anxious dogs relax when faced with new experiences.

For a MP3 downloads of noises, and a helpful booklet for dogs worried by sounds visit:

<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/dog-behaviour-health/sound-therapy-for-pets>