

Fear of the unknown

Training Tips

Get a medical workup. It's possible your dog is experiencing chronic discomfort that indirectly affects her threshold for fear, in which case your vet can treat the underlying condition. Also, healthy dogs who suffer from excessive fear can often be helped with oral medication used in conjunction with a behavior modification plan.

Don't punish fear. The one thing that can really make a dog's fearful behavior worse is punishing her for it. Even if your dog scratches or destroys out of fear, ignores commands, or pees in the house, resist the urge to punish her for fearful acts and focus instead on helping her overcome her dread.

Don't say, "It's okay." It's natural to want to speak soothingly and pet your dog when she's afraid, but it's a response your dog might misinterpret. She'll respond to your tone and not your words. If you sound worried, she'll tense up more. If you pet her, she'll discover that acting scared gets coddling from you.

Determine your dog's "anxiety zone." Develop an inventory of exactly what triggers your dog's fear; for each trigger, note the point at which her fear sets in. For example, if she's afraid of other dogs and you see one in the distance, how close is it when your dog starts to act fearful? Whether it's two feet or 20 feet away, that's the edge of her "anxiety zone." Don't force her nearer to the other dog; instead, play with her, speak cheerfully to her, and feed her some treats. If she's having fun when other dogs go by, she'll associate seeing other dogs with happy feelings. Slowly but surely you'll shrink the zone!

Model a casual, cheerful attitude. The famous behaviorist William Campbell calls this "the jolly routine": When your dog starts to look frightened, perk up and act happy. Speak in a high, singsong voice, and try to show that you're at ease. Your dog will pick up on your mood and should start to relax. When she does, praise her and give her a treat.

Avoid stressful situations. While you're working with your dog on this issue, don't put her in situations that usually frighten her. If you're having guests, for example, spend a little time playing with her before they arrive and then initially confine her in a separate room.

Keep introductions low-key. When your dog does have to meet a new person or confront a new object, make those introductions as uneventful as possible. Ask guests not to greet or reach for your dog. Try close-tethering her or – if she's been properly crate-trained – letting her settle in her crate on the opposite side of the room from your guest. Reward your dog for relaxing.

Practice obedience. One of the best ways to reassure your dog in a scary situation is to make her feel confident that you can handle it. If you routinely practice sitting, lying down, and staying on command, she will see you as a strong leader and have faith in your power to protect her. Basic command proficiency also gives you another tool when a stressful situation comes up. When you command her to sit, stay, or lie down, she'll have something to do when she's scared, and this can calm her.

Enlist the help of a behaviorist. Curbing the behavior that arises from extreme fear can be difficult without professional guidance, and it's easy to unintentionally make it worse.

Consider consulting an animal behaviorist, who can guide you through the process of teaching your dog to welcome new experiences.

Tools You Can Use

Gentle leader. This head halter has a calming effect on most dogs. The way it sits on a dog's head applies light pressure to the same areas that mother dogs press to manage their pups. Once your dog is used to this device, you can use it often to settle her down. Also, if she's in a panic, the Gentle Leader is much safer for her than the kind of collar that tightens when she pulls away.

Doggy treats. Experiment with different brands until you find a couple that your dog is crazy about. Use these treats to reward her for handling new situations or greeting guests without acting afraid. The more excited your dog is about her treats, the better tool they'll be for teaching her.

Food puzzle. A Kong filled with cheese or doggy treats can be a great distraction from fear. Give your dog the puzzle in her crate or while tethered before introducing a new person or object. If she's focused on playing with her new toy, she's far less likely to panic.

Crate. Your dog needs a refuge from scary indoor things like the vacuum cleaner. Leave the door of her crate open for the first several days, and hide treats and toys inside. To make the crate a favorite place, carefully follow the instructions in crate-training.

Tether. Tether-training provides a useful way to expose your dog to a frightening object in a limited way. You stay close by to give her a chew toy, act jolly, and praise any relaxed posture. Each time she loosens up a bit, you move her a little closer to what she dreads. Shrink the anxiety zone!