



## The Fear Factor

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### Is My Dog Shy and Fearful?

**What does it look like?** Watch your dog for any behavior such as the following: panting, trembling, whining, salivating, tucking of the tail, flattening of the ears, averting eyes, freezing, or attempting to flee. In extreme cases, your dog may lose control of his bladder or bowels or become destructive. Be watchful of situations in which your dog repeatedly displays these behaviors. You will need to recognize the fear level your dog is currently displaying so that you can acknowledge your starting point and reward future improvement.

**Why is my dog afraid?** You may genuinely want to understand why your dog behaves in this manner. Some dogs are genetically predisposed to fearful behavior. A dog not properly socialized to people, places, and things during his developmental months may display fearful behavior. A specific incident may be the cause of the fearful behavior. The truth is that you may never know the cause, and that's okay. The primary concern is to visit your vet and be certain that the behavior is not in response to a medical problem.

**Can I help my dog?** Your primary responsibility is to always insure your dog feels safe as you try to help her. Do not overwhelm her. Keep realistic expectations with regard to your dog's shyness. You can take steps to help your dog try to overcome her fears and gain confidence. However recognize that your dog may always display these behavior tendencies.

**Consult a professional.** You should consider having your dog evaluated by your veterinarian and a professional behavior specialist. Your vet can determine any medical problems contributing to your dog's behavior and recommend appropriate treatment. A professional behavior specialist can evaluate your dog and personalize the techniques discussed in this brochure to your individual dog's behavior and situation.

### Here's How to Help

The following example is given in the context of helping your dog overcome a fear of people. However, you can use similar techniques to help a dog that is fearful of noises, bicycles, or whatever.

**What's the goal?** The goal is to change your pet's association from negative to positive. In the beginning, do not take him to places such as Saturday Market or force him to be present during noisy social gatherings in your home. This will overwhelm him and may cause more harm than good. Depending on the individual pet, this change in association can be a slow process.

**What's the motivation?** Think about what your dog loves. Most dogs love food, food, and more food. Select a tasty treat that your dog does not normally receive like small pieces of white chicken meat, cheese, or freeze-dried liver. Some dogs prefer a tennis ball or other toy more than they prefer food. Reserve these rewards for training sessions to help enhance the experience for your dog.

**What's the preparation?** Make sure your dog is comfortable with you and is responsive to you. If he is not, then focus on improving your relationship before progressing further. You can improve your relationship by teaching your dog a few basic commands such as sit, down, and watch. Repeatedly practice these commands. If you need help teaching these commands, contact us for proper positive reinforcement techniques. Before progressing, be certain your dog will respond to you in the absence of any fearful situation. Recognize what your dog looks like when she is happy and relaxed.

#### Step 1 - Laying the foundation

The first step is to discover the distance at which your dog remains calm in the presence of people. Now think about a place where you will encounter people both beyond and at this fear threshold distance. Try a location where people will

be focused on something other than your dog, such as a shopping mall. Do not let people approach you and your dog during this training. Keep your dog focused on you as the people move past (even if you are at a great distance) insuring your dog remains calm. Reward your dog with treats and happy praise while he stays calm. In the beginning you may achieve more success by moving away from the people. As you move away, use a gentle arcing motion because this mimics a dog's natural movement. The object is not to have your dog face his fear but to ignore it, walk past it, and remain calm. For this to be successful, you must remain calm too. Try saying your dog's name in a happy tone, sing a silly song, or recite a nursery rhyme or tongue twister – any of these will help keep you calm so your actions do not make your dog more nervous. Consider using tools like a head halter to help direct your dog's visual focus onto you. If at any time your dog displays aggressive behavior, contact a behavior professional. Move forward only when your dog displays no visible signs of stress. Remember, you want your dog to remain happy and relaxed.

### **Step 2 - Building upon the foundation**

As long as your dog remains calm in the previous exercise, you can decrease the distance between you and the people. Back up and move further away anytime your dog shows signs of nervousness. If you are seeing success, try asking a person familiar to your dog to meet up with you while you are walking your dog. Ask the person to talk to you but not to acknowledge your dog. Then you and your dog continue walking past the person. Your goal is to eventually walk by a stranger with your dog remaining calm. Always keep moving as you walk past the person and remain calm yourself. Continue these sessions only as long as your dog remains calm. Remember to remain patient and progress s-l-o-w-l-y. Some sessions may only last a few minutes. Always end the session on a positive note and begin the next session with the person at a comfortable distance away from your dog.

### **Step 3 - What's next?**

With continued success in the training exercises discussed in the previous sections, gradually introduce similar but progressively stronger stimuli, including quicker movements and various tones of voice used by the approaching person. Slowly add accessories such as hats, large purses, walkers, or sunglasses. Remember that persons with beards or glasses can be particularly frightening for dogs so wait until your dog is comfortable with people without these accessories before including them in training sessions. Expect setbacks when you add anything new or when you go to a new location. Just remain patient and help your dog through the new scenario.

**How long with this take?** There is no easy answer to that question. This entire process may take days, weeks, or months. Remember to proceed slowly. Otherwise you will not be successful. Always remain patient with your dog and keep your expectations in line with your dog's progress. Move forward at your dog's pace and only when she is happy and relaxed.

## **General Do's and Don'ts**

### **Do**

- Control your dog's environment by limiting his exposure to fearful situations. If your dog is fearful of people and company is visiting your home, your dog will prefer staying in his crate or a quiet room away from the visitors. If your dog is fearful of fireworks, your dog will prefer listening to the radio or a fan.
- Consider your dog's perspective. Just because you like attending Saturday market or other crowded events, do not expect your dog to enjoy these events. Think about this scenario. A person fearful of spiders would not feel comfortable in a room full of spiders, especially if that person was leashed to one of the spiders! Even though the spider holding the leash is talking to the other spiders and telling the person that everything is going to be okay, the person will still likely be uncomfortable. This is how your dog feels at a crowded event.
- Learn your dog's language to minimize his fearful feelings. Ask others to approach him from the side instead of directly head-on. Make little or no eye contact. Keep hands low and make no sudden movements. Speak softly. Pet him under the chin or on the chest instead of on the top of his head.
- Remain calm yourself. Your dog is highly in tune with you and your emotions. He will pick up on any tension on his leash, changes in your breathing, and nervousness in your voice. Breathe slowly and deeply. Speak calmly.
- Watch for small signs of improvement such as sitting or lying down, approaching a once fearful situation, or displaying her tail instead of tucking it underneath her. **REWARD AND PRAISE** these small signs!

- Feel comfortable saying “No” if strangers ask to pet your dog. Your dog will appreciate you for doing so. Explain that he is really shy and he is uncomfortable with strangers petting him. Kindly thank the person for asking and walk on.
- Enroll in training classes. These could be for basic obedience, agility, or fun tricks. Classes will help strengthen the bond between you and your dog as well as build your dog’s confidence. Inform the instructor about your dog’s shyness before classes begin, to ensure it is an appropriate fit.
- Ask for help! This is not an easy process. You can reach the OHS Behavior Help Line at (503) 416-2983 or email a trainer [OHSTrainers@oregonhumane.org](mailto:OHSTrainers@oregonhumane.org).
- Be patient and try to have fun!

## **Don’t**

- Do not coddle or console your dog. This will reinforce the fearful behavior and may increase the behavior. Encouragement and praise for confident behavior is more appropriate than comforting her in fearful situations.
- Never force your dog into situations in which she is fearful. This will backfire on any progress you may have made and will likely increase her fear. If you unexpectedly find yourself in a situation that is fearful for your dog, calmly and quickly remove your dog from the situation, do not make a fuss over him, and then move on.
- Do not use any physical or harsh corrections, especially pinch collars, popping a choke collar, shouting, or hitting. While this is true with any dog, it is especially true with a shy dog. You want your dog to trust you not fear you.
- Do not expect too much too soon. You may take several steps backward if you proceed at your desired pace rather than at your dog’s pace. Small successful steps bring about more progress toward overcoming your dog’s fears. Remember that high levels of fear block a dog’s ability to learn. So you and your dog will require extra time and patience if he experiences excessive fear.
- Don’t assume that your dog will display consistent behavior in new scenarios. Anytime one thing changes – a person or place – your dog may take a few steps backward. Stay confident and calm and help your dog through this new situation.

You and your dog will experience ups and downs while trying to overcome his fears. You may not always understand what prompts a downward turn and that’s okay. Just move through it and enjoy each other’s company!