

# FEARFUL DOGS

Fearful dogs are a challenge and require plenty of patience. Helping fearful dogs is definitely not a quick or easy process. Dogs that are fearful may have been that way for months, and it will take some time to unlearn it. Many fearful dogs are under-socialized and have never been able to experience different people or new situations.

## Objective

The goal is to show fearful dogs that they are safe. We can help this process by giving them choices: offer them meals in their crate or a small confined gated area, but if they back away, give them the food where they want to eat. By doing this, they will learn that they have a choice and will start trusting you because you empower them to make the decision. You are not forcing them to do anything they are uncomfortable with.

We want to help your dog learn how to feel more confident, especially when confronted with stimuli that makes them fearful. Try to closely observe your dog and learn to recognize triggers that cause them to be uncomfortable. What are they afraid of and to what degree? What is their threshold for dealing with fear-inducing stimuli? For example, a trigger for your dog might be a group of people approaching, but they might be okay with just one person approaching. Maybe they're okay with a dog 15 feet away on the other side of the street, but not on the same side of the street. When training, your goal is to determine your dog's threshold for fear, and then keep your dog under it.

The training exercises in class can help your dog become more comfortable. For example, while on a walk, ask your dog to sit and watch something else instead of looking at the person on the other side of the street. Sit, touch and watch should become second nature to your dog. Not only is your dog reinforced for this behavior, but you are distracting them from growling, barking or lunging. Dogs learn by repetition of success, so if they can practice the good behavior instead of the unwanted behavior, they will learn the good behavior. In general, training is a great way to build a dog's confidence.

There are going to be days where your dog seems to be making progress and days where they seem to regress. This will happen less and less, but remember it has been how your dog is used to handling scary things, which we are trying to help them overcome. Keep the following points in mind when you're trying to help your dog overcome their fear:

- Gaining your dog's trust is the most important building block to building her confidence.
- Respect your dog's fears — they are real! Focus is on changing how they feel.
- Is there a place your dog can go to feel safe? A quiet environment is best.
- Give your dog time to gain confidence in you. This will enable trust.
- Create routines. Routines are more predictable and are easier on your dog.

- **DO NOT** ask your dog to interact with people until they are ready. If they are afraid of people, ask people to please ignore your dog.
- **DO NOT** ask your dog to do anything they are clearly uncomfortable doing.
- **DO NOT** punish your dog for fearful behavior such as snarling, growling, lunging or urinating. They won't understand why they are being punished and they may begin to associate the punishment with the trigger.
  - Instead, we want to associate these triggers with something positive.
- Avoid putting your dog in situations where they would practice inappropriate behaviors such as snapping or growling.
- When approaching your dog, whether it's you or another person:
  - Approach by walking in an arc rather than moving straight towards her.
  - Walk slowly and quietly with no extraneous movement.
- Make every approach count by gently tossing your dog (or even handing to them, if they're comfortable) whenever you or anyone else approaches. The goal is to create a positive association between treats and the approach of a human. (Cheese, hot dogs, liver, and roasted chicken are excellent treats.) After you've given them the treat, continue walking past your dog without stopping.
- Do not rush your dog — keep your expectations low. You must go at the dog's pace and monitor their reactions to different situations. Look for signs, however small, of a positive reaction such as anticipation. Your dog might look alert instead of cowering, lowering their head or slinking.
- If your dog has a scary experience, give them time to decompress and calm down. Try to reward your dog immediately **AFTER** a scary trigger appears and keep rewarding until scary trigger goes away.
- No corrections or punishment.

## **Common Signs of Fear and Triggers**

Common signs of fear include:

- Cowering
- Lowered ears
- Shaking
- Fleeing
- Drooling

- Growling
- Snapping or biting

You'll also want to make note of your dog's triggers — whatever scares your dog. Common triggers include:

- Being approached
- Direct eye contact
- Being talked to or handled
- Men — sometimes men in general, sometimes specifically men with beards
- People in uniform
- People wearing hats or backpacks
- Rambunctious, high-energy kids (quiet kids may be okay)
- More than one (unfamiliar) person in the house

Identify the threshold for each of your dog's trigger. Usually they are based on distance and/or duration: for example, men are scary when they're five feet away but not 10 feet, or kids only become scary when they're around for more than 30 seconds. You can only train your dog when they are under threshold, so you might need to increase the distance and/or time between them and their trigger.

Also, please note that if your dog is scared, they may be unable or unwilling to eat, so all the more reason to help your dog come to terms with their fears.