

Scaredy dog – helping your dog to overcome fear



Introduction

Dogs can be worried by many different things. Sometimes it's the approach of people, or other dogs. Or it might be sights, sounds - or even smells - in the environment.

Recognising that your dog is feeling fearful is an important first step to being able to help him or her, and knowing how to handle the situation is important to avoid making it worse for both you and your dog.



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1. Fear can manifest itself in many different ways. In some dogs, it's really obvious – their tails are down, their ears back and they look miserable and try to hide. Other dogs may appear to be 'naughty' – barking and lunging for example, or they may come and ask you for help by jumping up at you or hiding behind you. This shouldn't be ignored. If he's asking for help, you should give it.

2. It's important to realise that when you are in the crisis moment, you need to focus on minimising the impact of the unpleasant feelings – this is not a training situation, but a behavioural emergency:

- **Stay calm yourself**

Why? Because emotional states such as fear are contagious, and your dog needs you to be the strong, rational one right now. You CAN comfort and reassure your dog through touching and talking to him or her, but keep this calm. Avoid shouting, over-the-top fuss or any other adrenalin-fuelled behaviour that's going to make your dog think you are scared too.

- **Get your dog out of there!**

Wherever possible, it's best to try and remove your dog from the situation, or thing that's causing the fear. This is not the time to try and train him or her to cope with it – that comes later. Right now, you need to opt for damage limitation and either remove your dog from the trigger or remove the trigger from the dog.

If you don't, it might mean that your dog escalates his or her behaviour in response to the threat.

Removing your dog from the situation might mean picking him up if he's small, or turning on your heel and walking away with your dog to create distance between you and the scary thing. In the case of fireworks or thunder, where removing the threat isn't possible, then minimising it by allowing the dog to 'den' or hide can be a useful strategy until it's over.



- **Good things happen here**

Make your dog feel better if possible by giving food treats, playing, or engaging in some activity or focus which will act as a happier distraction. Some dogs won't eat or play when they are worried, but it's worth a try as long as you don't put pressure on them if they don't engage.

3. Once the 'crisis' has passed, it's time to review why you think your dog may have been worried by the situation, and to create a plan of re-training that will help him learn to cope better in the future and eventually change his mind about the situation altogether. This is often a complex procedure and is best done with the help of a behaviour professional. It will usually involve teaching your dog to associate good things with the very gradual presentation of the scary thing at the lowest level. For example, if your dog is scared of other dogs, then allowing him to see a very calm dog at a comfortable distance multiple times, and giving him special treats and play when he does, should begin to reduce his fear as he starts to realize that the other dog is not a threat, but is the signal that good things are about to happen.

Behaviour modification might also involve teaching your dog an effective coping strategy away from the trigger and then very gradually helping him to choose the new behaviour in similar circumstances. However, it's vital that this training is done 'sub-threshold' - in other words, far enough away from the trigger that your dog doesn't react badly - and in tiny stages. Best results are always seen when you allow your dog to make his own choices about whether to be brave yet - it's up to him, not us.

As humans, we know that being truly frightened comes with a whole set of unpleasant feelings. We know that when we are fearful, we are more likely to just react rather than thinking clearly, and there's evidence to suggest that dogs are more prone to this than we are. As their team-mates, it's up to us to support our dogs when they are worried, to be their rock when they lack confidence, and to help them learn to cope with things better in the future too. It's what makes us family.

**For behaviour & Training help with your dog
check out: cleverdogcompany.com or APDT.co.uk**