

Fears in our dogs

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Most, if not all, dogs have things that they are afraid of, however some dogs have such extreme fears that it interferes with daily life; so much so that often times they can't function properly and can even shut down completely. Working with dogs that are displaying symptoms of extreme fear can be both simple and difficult at the same time. It can be simple in terms of what you need to do to help show the dog that you are not going to hurt it and begin to lay the seeds of trust and slowly build up their confidence. It is difficult because in many ways you have to resist reacting in the way that you instinctively want to as dictated by human nature (i.e. trying to reassure the dog). Working with fears also requires sensitivity to the dog's body language and moods as well as your own, you have to feel what the dog truly needs as well as using intuition.

If there was ever a situation where the phrase, "less is more" applied more to than when working with fearful dogs I have yet to find it. Human nature tells us that when someone is in extreme fear/distress that we should try to hug them, reassure them, and/or tell them that they are okay/safe. All this will do is show your dog that you are now upset as well and they not only have to cope with the situation but with you being upset as well. What you should in fact be doing is not make any reaction at all, rather than making a big deal out of, what is usually, nothing.

Many dogs with extreme fear develop them as a result of past traumatic experiences and situations, however many dogs also develop fear as a result of a nervous personality which then have mishandled experiences that develop fears even further. For example: usually when you have a dog that is afraid of people, in particular men, people automatically assume that the dog has had an abusive past. While this does unfortunately happen to several dogs, my experience has shown that in most situations it comes as a result of having a naturally cautious/wary personality that require a very patient hand to earn trust. Oftentimes people don't know what signs to look for in the dog's body language or don't realize how their own body language is interfering with building trust within the dog. As a result the dog becomes more nervous/cautious/distant and reacts more and more to the people and their movements, which can then cause increasing frustration within the people and get them to try harder to bond with the dog, which then stresses the dog out more and you end up with the situation descending into a downward spiral. "Fear can cause pathological behavior when the individual is exposed to fear-eliciting stimuli for too long. Fear is always connected to submission. If the submissive individual becomes self-assured then the submission will give way to dominance and fear disappears." (Dog Language: an Encyclopedia of Canine Behaviour, Roger Abrantes)

A very common fear for many dogs is that of loud noises like thunder or fireworks. When they start to react when the noises begin, as long as they are not doing anything that will cause harm to themselves or others you should leave them be. If they run and hide somewhere that they feel safe, let them go rather than trying to make them face their fears as so many people inappropriately do. If they are causing harm then you should take them by the collar, or by slip lead if this is safer, and calmly hold them near you until you feel them relax. It is important that you lead by example and

keep yourself very calm throughout, if you need to you can read a book or watch TV or do something else that will distract you from your dog's reactions.

Many dogs express extreme fear of other dogs and when feeling restricted or confined (i.e. when on lead or within a pen) will have a "shorter fuse" or in other words will react defensively/aggressively much quicker when their flight option has been taken away from them. It is important that the dog is not put in a situation where they are forced to interact with another dog until it feels comfortable and is truly ready to do so. If it is a dog that has been brought into a home with other dogs it is essential to use gates and pens to block off doorways so that the other dogs are prevented from invading the fearful dog's space but the fearful dog can still be exposed to the other dogs as they feel safe enough to approach the barrier. You can also begin to build the dog's confidence by exposing them to other dogs from a distance such as from the other side of a fence at a park that dogs play at. It is important that you keep it close enough that they can be exposed to the sights/smells/sounds of the other dogs but you are far enough away that they don't feel the pressure of interacting. It's best to start with as little stimuli as possible and as the dog's confidence grows you can gradually increase the stimuli. The concept of flooding where you expose a dog to constant source of fear rarely works. That would be the equivalent of someone terrified of mice being placed in a room filled with mice. In most, if not all, situations all this does is place that person into a state of panic which causes a change in the brain and hormone levels, which will cause a change in the functioning of the organs and ultimately in behavior. The only way to restore the body back to normal is to remove the stimulus and allow the body to return to a normal state.

The fear that people have the most difficulty in overcoming is that of people, most commonly of men and/or children. Dogs commonly find children and men more intimidating for several reasons: children tend to be louder, faster, and more unpredictable. Men on the other hand tend to be bigger, use deeper tones, and are unintentionally rougher in how they handle dogs than women (e.g. giving



attention by patting a dog rather than stroking like most women do). Another possible reason dogs having a common fear in men could be related to the way we walk. "Research published in *Current Biology* asked volunteers to guess the direction of motion of figures that were represented only by points of light placed at critical joints. (Similar to the motion capture process used to make movies like *Avatar* in which a real person moves around with points of light attached to hips, elbows, shoulders, knees etc, and a computer records the movement of the lights.) When watching the

points of light that represented a moving figure, the volunteers said that the figures made by men were approaching, while the figures made by woman were retreating."

(<https://www.patriciamcconnell.com/theotherendoftheleash/why-dog-are-more-afraid-of-men>) Based on the research done with this study you see that men tend to walk in a way that resembles something approaching and women resemble retreating motion, if that is the case then it's no wonder how

nervous dogs are more afraid around men, as walking straight towards is often seen as more confrontational body language than something that is moving away or in a curving motion.

As stated earlier, building trust in dogs that are afraid of people requires attention, intuition, and sensitivity to all situations as well as a willingness to alter your lifestyle as you work to show your dog that they can trust you. Whenever working with such dogs I find it extremely important to leave a leash hooked to the dog's collar so that when you need to take them out to toilet or move them around you can grab the leash rather than the dog and therefore put less pressure on the dog. Having worked with and fostered many dogs suffering from extreme fears I always begin by doing absolutely nothing with the dog. **I make sure to make no eye contact, touch, or vocal interaction with the dog until they are ready.** It's extremely important to stick to this and to resist the very strong, sometimes overwhelming, desire to give the dog affection until the dog shows you signs that the time is right. You will also show your dog that you provide for them during the few times you do interact with them which is when you're feeding them. While understanding that each dog is different and will not all react the same in the same amount of time I have found the following with the dogs I have worked. For the first several days the dog will react to your movements by running and/or hiding from you, choosing the flight option as best they can to stay away. Let them go, don't try to force them to "face their fear" and be near you. If they choose to hide in places that make it difficult for you to remove them from in the cases of putting them away while you leave or taking them to the toilet such as hiding under the bed then you can block the bottom of the bed so it's no longer an option for a safe zone. Also remember that during this time the dog may be very vocal and bark or growl at you, stay calm and make sure that you're giving them proper space so they don't feel trapped which can make them feel like they have to defend themselves.

Usually after a few days you start to see the dog running/hiding less and less and they will begin to show curiosity and interest in you, as if confused by the fact that you haven't done anything at all to or with them. You will see them starting to follow you around more and more, maybe even trying to come up cautiously to sniff you, in some cases even trying to get attention from you. **It is extremely important that you avoid falling for this false sense of security and again resist giving the interaction that you so desperately want to give.** Often times when you do give attention at this point the dog regresses and goes back to the point of hiding from you and you start all over again. If you continue to avoid the interaction it allows the dog to see that you're not a threat and aren't putting any pressure or expectations on them. In several cases I have seen the dog become comfortable enough with people that they don't react to their moving around in as short as a week, however there are many things to



look for that the dog is ready for small bits of affection. One major thing to look for is how they react to you moving around the home, if you can move past them without them running away from you or getting up to follow you around to keep an eye on where you're at. Other things to be aware of is the dog's body language: how wide their eyes are, how far back they're holding their ears, how tucked their tails are, how low they're holding their posture, etc... When the dog is displaying signs that they're comfortable with your presence you can then try calling them over, if they come only give them very small bits of affection at time to start with, if they don't come leave them be and you can try again later. It's important that you allow them to come to you rather than going to them to give attention.

Throughout this process it's important to also be willing to alter your lifestyle to accommodate working with your dog's fear. You want to be very aware of your own body language and understanding what messages it gives to your dog; many calming signals can be learned by reading "On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals" by Turid Rugaas. Slow movement and walking in curving fashion around your dog rather than going straight towards/past the dog is less intimidating. Not speaking in loud or deeper tones can also be less intimidating. You will need to also avoid giving a lot of direct eye contact as you start giving affection as this can be interpreted as very confrontational. You will also want to avoid having a lot of company over until the dog is ready, and if you do have company over allow the dog to remain in a back room where they won't be put under unnecessary pressure that could prove to be detrimental to your progress.

The biggest things that your dog need are time and space. You can't force your dog to trust you, it's something that they have to figure out for themselves. They will be extremely sensitive to your movements and moods/emotions so be very aware of how you're behaving around them. This is also something that can be a long process, so don't get impatient and go at your dog's pace. Remember that less is more.

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