

TYPES OF FEAR

Fearful behavior in dogs is classified as one of the following categories:

| ANXIETY | FEAR | PHOBIA |
|---|--|---|
| the feeling that something bad is about to happen | perception of a threat that triggers the threat response | an “irrational” fear of common things, like thunderstorms |

Some dogs may only experience just one type of fear, while others may have a combination. All involve the threat center of the brain, regardless of why or how the dog reacts.

THREAT RESPONSE

Fear can appear as cowering and hiding or as growling, snarling, and biting. These are all normal and natural threat responses in dogs. Most forms of aggression are rooted in the threat response, no matter how “mean” or “angry” the dog appears.

While we may not understand why a dog is afraid of something, no matter how irrational it may seem, remember that **THE FEAR IS REAL TO THE DOG.**

BODY LANGUAGE OF FEAR

While people recognize cowering or a tucked tail as fear, there are other signs that dogs display that are signs of increasing stress, including:

- Low tail
- Low ears
- Lip licking
- Look/turn away
- Slow/tense movement
- Growling



WHY ARE SOME DOGS MORE FEARFUL THAN OTHERS?

There are a variety of reasons dogs might exhibit fearful behavior and some dogs may be fearful due to a combination of factors. The most common cause is a lack of positive socialization prior to 14 weeks of age. Trauma, whether intentional or accidental, is another cause. Certain situations, such as being in the shelter or vet clinic, can trigger fear. If the environment is the issue, removing them will resolve the problem. Finally, Fearful behavior can be hereditary. If one or both parents are fearful, their puppies are likely to be fearful as well.

We can't always know exactly why a dog is fearful. However, we don't need to know why in order to help them feel more comfortable.

THE MYTH OF “REWARDING FEAR”

Fear is an emotion, which is not something a dog has control over. Because of this, we can't “reward fear,” any more than we can reward someone's grief, frustration, or disgust. If your dog is seeking your attention when they are afraid, petting them will not reward their fear.

FORCE IS NOT SOCIALIZATION

While some people believe that dogs can “get used to” things they fear through repeated and prolonged exposure, such as going to a dog park, immersing a dog in situations they fear is more likely to *sensitize* them, leading to more behavior problems down the road.

HELPING FEARFUL DOGS

In order to change our dogs' fearful behavior, we have to ask three questions:

1. **Do they feel safe or unsafe?** If a dog feels unsafe – in other words, if they are exhibiting fearful body language, it will be much harder to change their association. Start by exposing them at a distance and intensity where signs of stress are minimal. This is called *desensitization*.
2. **Do good things or bad things happen?** Our goal is to teach dogs that good things happen in these situations. The best and fastest way to do that is with really good food. By following exposure with high-value food (often meat or cheese), dogs can learn that good things happen. This is called *counter-conditioning*.
3. **Is this what they would choose?** Modern animal training recognizes that when dogs have the choice to avoid a potentially scary situation, it increases their confidence and cooperation.

What this looks like for your dog depends on their behavior, what triggers their fear, the environment, and many other factors. This is where working with a qualified professional can help. **Contact the Sacramento SPCA Behavior Department for available services.**

Dog not taking food? That's usually a sign that their stress levels are way too high. If they can't eat, they can't form positive associations. Also be sure to rule out illness or pain with the vet.

Behavior Medications. Some dogs are anxious or fearful in too many situations for us to desensitize and counter-condition to everything. In these cases, providing immediate relief is important and anti-anxiety medications prescribed by your vet can make a tremendous difference at the beginning of your behavior program. Don't rule them out!

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