

FEAR

Where does it come from? How do owners deal with it? How did it happen? These are common questions with sometimes many answers.

First off, let me assure you that caution or shyness is not a 100% bad thing! It is normal for dogs, as well as humans, to be uneasy about new things or situations. If that weren't the case, I don't know what species would have survived in this world.

Even when we have made a contentious effort to socialize a dog, there are going to be times that something they have never seen or experienced pops up and they may be shy about it. Occasionally, a dog will find something very uncomfortable, and seemingly will not get past it. This can then become fearsome enough to, over time, cause fear aggression. Working through fears with an adult dog can and is a time consuming process and requires a lot of patience, but is worth the effort to help the dog become more generally comfortable and relaxed.

So, if you have a dog with fears or that is terrible shy, what can be done about it? This can be approached in several ways, depending on what the fear is and how long it has been such. Also, to what extent is the dog now reacting – is it growling and lunging, or is it hiding behind the owner quietly?

Let's touch on some of the symptoms, so we can determine the extent of communication by the dog. The dog may:

- Retreat – this annoys most owners, but is not horrible in that as long as the owner has a line on the dog, it is not escalating into rougher ground.
- Growl – a warning. I personally always appreciate a dog that will audibly warn as it allows everyone to know the dog is over its threshold. ALWAYS pay attention to a growl. Some growls are actually almost not audible, some are loud.
- Snarl – typically, this indicates that the dog feels quite threatened by something scary and a growl was either ignored or the dog has learned that a snarl works better.
- Snap – this means the dog is completely over its threshold and is trying desperately to make something go away. A snap is technically a bite that is in the air – the dog did not intend to 'connect' but to make its fear level and intent to react known.
- Bite – here there are categories.
 - There are inhibited bites, those that connect but do no harm. This can be simply placing the mouth on the human, but not bearing down or trying to tear.
 - Serious bites are those that break the skin.

These are all emotional reactions to the shyness/fear. Let's talk about how they can be dealt with. I'd like to explain a few terms that you will hear coming out of my mouth, so you don't feel confused.

- Desensitization – a technique used to treat even humans with anxiety and phobias. The dog is exposed to the fear causing situation at a level that does not cause a response. It is very gradually increased, according to the dog's ability to cope.
- Counter conditioning – used with desensitization. One event becomes the preface to another event, thus making an association between the two. An example is; car keys rattling means a car ride is

coming. This is the Pavlovian sequence – dog hears bell, food happens next. Soon, bell causes dog to drool even without food.

Desensitization and counter conditioning are used together.

- Classical conditioning – this is about the relationship of events one to another, or associations.
- Operant conditioning – this is about the dog learning how its behavior affects consequences, or rewards and punishment.

Classical conditioning and operant conditioning are used together.

I usually work with these shy/fearsome dogs by establishing a conditioned emotional response. In plain English that means – dog sees what it fears, offers calm/no fear reaction, receives reinforcement. This allows the dog to participate in its own training and replaces reactive behavior with a new behavior. It does not happen in a week! But, if you are patient and kind and don't try to push too fast, it does happen...

We humans make mistakes in dealing with fear, and that's especially true of the female human. It is part of us to want to 'console' and tell them 'It's OK', and touch them. This actually perpetuates the problem as the dog is receiving attention for being fearsome. Acknowledge the times the dog is not displaying fear, and avoid situations that you know make the dog afraid.

On the other hand, if you have not managed a situation well and the dog reacts with growls, bared teeth snarl, snapping or worse, you cannot safely ignore the behavior. To do so gives the dog input that it is appropriate and allowed. Immediately remove the dog to a distance that is no longer fearsome. Do not give the event a lot of reaction on your part, either in the form of "It's OK" or in "NO! Bad dog!" Either response on your part is just that – a response – and can be considered reinforcement.

I like to remove the dog from whatever it wants. Typically, that's to be with the owner. So, a form of negative punishment is to remove the dog calmly and as quietly as possible to a safe and quiet place and remove you from the dog's presence. You have now taken away something the dog wants – you and the possibility to interact with you.

Next, roll up a newspaper and hit yourself on the head and say – poor management, don't let it happen again. While working a dog through specific fears, it is critical to manage situations so as to avoid the dog being pushed over its threshold! To do so sets you back severely on your road to desensitization and counter-conditioning.

So, I suggest that you sit down and actually write out a plan (referred to as a hierarchy) of progressions and systematically proceed toward your goal. Remember the 80% rule:

Do not raise criteria (difficulty) until you have had 80% success three sessions in a row! That's easy math – 4 out of 5 or 8 out of 10. Don't cheat here – you'll find yourself going backwards very shortly down the road

Remember, it takes at least 5000 repetitions to achieve a reliable behavior. It does not take any less to replace one emotion with a more desirable emotion. Here's the math:

15 reps a session

- 3 sessions a day
- 7 days a week
- Takes roughly 16 weeks to do 5000

▪ Now the eye opener! If an event causes your dog to go over its threshold and become reactive – you are back at least 30 reps, so moving too fast and causing a failure will definitely get your 16 weeks extended. An event that is full blown can actually cause you to be back to the beginning, as the dog has decided that this thing is still really scary.

▪ So, take out a long sheet of paper and list your hierarchy for progressions – you should have about 100 steps. Plod along with patience – you didn't learn to walk and talk well in 16 weeks!!! Have realistic expectations of your dog – they are individuals just like us. Humans actually do not get past their fears as quickly as we can help our dogs do so. Help them through it – don't demand...

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