Anxiety

Many forms of problem behavior are a result of fear. Some people assume shy dogs are more likely to be afraid and anxious.

While this is often the case, it is also true that assertive dogs can also worry about things over which they have no control. Your dog’s temperament may have little to do with whether anxiety will be a problem at some time in his life.

Anything that is new or unfamiliar to your dog could pose a threat to his life so it’s normal for a dog to fear the unusual. A dog can become anxious if frequently exposed to something he fears. In the home environment, where your dog has you to protect him, this anxiety is unnecessary.

Your first instinct when your dog displays anxious behavior such as trembling or hiding, is to comfort him by petting, soothe him with your voice or pick him up. These reassurances DO make him feel better but comforting also makes it more likely that he will use the same strategy next time. You can help your dog overcome fear and prevent anxiety more quickly by ignoring anxiousness and rewarding more appropriate attention seeking behaviors.

TYPES OF ANXIETIES

Phobias

If your dog is genuinely frightened of a specific person, object or event that can be avoided, it’s appropriate to simply avoid it. However, some dogs fear common events that can’t be prevented: car rides, the groomer, or sunglasses. You can help your dog overcome fear and prevent anxiety by ignoring anxious behavior and rewarding appropriate attention seeking behaviors (such as play or obedience).

The phrase trainers use to describe what you must do is “bar open, bar closed.” This means while any fearful trigger is present, food falls from the sky. When the trigger is moving away or gone, the food source vanishes. It does not matter if the dog eats at first. This bar open, bar closed method of training helps your dog think of triggers of nervousness in
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a new way. That’s all. Bar open, bar closed is not restricted to food and drink either. Any item already paired with fun and relaxation will do: a tennis ball, a squeaky toy, a leash or delicious bone. The idea is that whenever the previously undesirable thing is present, so is the desirable thing. Whenever one leaves, the other is gone, too.

**Fear of Strangers:** If your dog is anxious around strangers, have a friend (but a stranger to your dog) come over for a visit. When your guest arrives, ignore your dog’s trembling, whining or hiding. Sit beside or perpendicular to your friend (face to face orientation signals confrontation to a dog). Bounce a ball or share food with your friend while you talk for half an hour or so. Act happy and acknowledge your dog calmly each time he moves to play or stops shivering. DON’T invite the dog to approach you by calling him or offering food. Instead, ignore all fearful behavior and respond to all interactive behavior by tossing treats or playing with the ball. If you see any signs that your dog is overwhelmed, go back to a previous level of exposure to the fearful situation, perhaps by moving away from your friend or going outside to talk. Work up to the new level of exposure to the fearful thing gradually and gently.

**Fear of Thunderstorms:** If your dog is afraid of storms, try buying or downloading a recording of thunderstorms and adjust the volume over the course of a half hour while playing with a ball or feeding him. The dog will NOT think the recording is a real storm (real storms include changes in temperature and barometric pressure). But the recording is a good first step to reduce his fear of the sounds that accompany a storm. Act happy and reward all interactive behavior while ignoring all anxious behavior. During a regular storm, offer your dog the same rewards for calm behavior. If your dog is usually motivated by food but won’t eat during a storm, wait until you see lightning and offer a delicious food treat that takes a moment to chew. Your dog will be gulping it down just as the thunder claps, perfectly timing the reward for NOT being afraid.

**Fear of Riding in the Car:** If your dog is afraid of riding in the car, reward him for jumping in and out of the car without taking a trip. The next day, start the car while rewarding him then turn it off again. Then take several short trips so that you can stop the trip before he becomes overwhelmed. Once he’s accustomed to taking short trips, take him on longer drives to wonderful places: the dog park, the beach, a play date at a friend’s house. Be sure most trips end in happy events and not just the kennel or the vet’s office. The point is to cheer your dog through becoming accustomed to the things he used to fear.

During this retraining period, be sure that all “new” experiences are good ones. Protect your dog by taking him out for a walk or into another room if you have repairmen or guests arriving when you have not prepared them in
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advance. You may ask your vet to prescribe a tranquilizer for impending storms or trips that will occur before you have had time to retrain your dog. Don’t train when your dog is taking a sedative. Other medications, such as antidepressants may help a dog with chronic anxiety. Be sure to ask your vet about the effects of medication on learning and activity level.

Repetitive Licking

There is a special manifestation of anxiety in which dogs lick a front paw, abdomen or flank so that a skin irritation develops. This is not usually related to allergies or flea dermatitis. A dog may spend hours licking the area. To stop the behavior you can apply an anti-lick ointment such as YUK or Bitter Apple to your dog’s fur. In addition to the ointment, reward your dog any time he is NOT licking by stopping to pat him or offering him a toy. Ignore all licking behavior. If you play with your dog to distract him from licking he will learn to lick to get your attention. Only invite him to play when he is NOT licking. If your dog has caused any skin lesion, you should talk to your vet about medications used to treat anxiety. Some licking habits have a neurological or inherited basis that responds to medication.

Separation Anxiety

If your dog’s anxious behavior only occurs when you are not home, often referred to as separation anxiety, you can gradually accustom your dog to staying alone, just as you accustom him to other fear inducing situations.