

Dealing with Your Dog's Fears and Phobias

It is difficult to determine why some dogs develop fears and phobias. Recognizing your dog's behavior as fearful and helping him work through his fears is the most effective way to handle phobias.

Sometimes fears can be specific; for example, some dogs fear men in uniform. Other fears may be generalized, so a dog once afraid of only thunderstorms may eventually become afraid of fireworks and slamming doors too. Working with your dog's initial fear to prevent other fears from escalating is important.

For most owners, it's easy to identify the cause of a dog's fear. A dog that's afraid of loud noises may hear a clap of thunder, crouch near the ground, and tremble. He may urinate, his pupils may dilate, his ears will lay flat against his head, and he may try to hide under beds, behind couches or in closets.

What to Avoid

Do not comfort and console your dog by petting him and telling him everything will be just fine. Consoling a fearful animal by petting and speaking to him in a soothing tone can reinforce the fearful behavior and increase his fear (i.e., he is being praised for trembling and hiding).

Tension or worry in the owner also communicates to the dog that there *is* something to fear. Next time he hears a boom of thunder he will undoubtedly continue to exhibit fear as the owner continues to reward him with soothing praise and stroking. It becomes a cycle as your dog becomes more afraid and may extend his fear to other things.

The same goes for forcing a dog to "face his fear" by making him accept the approach of someone or something of which he's afraid. This may result in an animal who panics and may eventually bite. He may growl a warning and, when that does not work, he may bark. All he's asking is that he be allowed to get used to the scary thing at his own pace. Reprimanding him for growling and barking will only teach him that he must use his last resort: a bite.

How to Help Your Dog

One way to help dogs overcome fears is through desensitization. Desensitization begins with a low-level stimulus similar to whatever it is the dog is afraid of, then increasing the stimulus in stages until he is no longer fearful.

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Here is an example of the desensitization process for a dog afraid of thunder:

- Play the taped sounds of a thunderstorm at the very lowest audible level and take your dog into another room, away from the speakers. Have him sit, lay down, or do a trick. Reward the dog with a treat when he does what you ask.
- Once he is comfortable with the “storm” at that level, turn the volume up slightly and continue working with him on commands to distract his attention from the noise in the other room.
- Again, when he is comfortable, turn the volume up a bit more and repeat the trick-for-reward routine.
- As long as the dog is not showing any signs of fear, continue to turn up the volume in small increments and work in another room with the command/reward sequence.
- Once the volume can be increased to the level of a real storm, and the dog is comfortable in another room, turn the volume down to about one-third the level it was and work with your dog in the same room as the noise, again asking him to sit, lay down, etc., and rewarding with food or favorite toys.
- Begin again to slowly increase the volume with the dog in the same room, repeating the trick-for-reward routine.

Eventually, your dog should be able to be in the same room as the thunderstorm recording without exhibiting any signs of fear. Go slowly. Don't try to accomplish more than one volume level at a time. It may take weeks to go from one volume level to the next, depending on the extent of his fear.

Pay attention to your dog's reactions at all times. If he shows ***any*** sign of fear at any stage of the desensitization process, stop immediately and go back to the previous step.

When to Desensitize Your Dog

This process works well in teaching fearful dogs to accept things of which they're afraid. For it to work effectively, though, it is important to avoid whatever is causing the fear during the desensitization process. That can be difficult. If you are working specifically with thunderstorm problems, start the desensitization process in the winter months, when storms are least likely to occur.

This type of desensitization can work with other fears as well, including fear of strangers, babies, people in uniform, etc. Remember not to force your pet to accept something with which he is not comfortable. Develop a plan and take small steps. The benefits of taking your time can be long lasting.



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If your dog's fear of people has led to aggression, it is critical that you seek help from a qualified behavior consultant before starting a desensitization program.