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CANINE FEARS AND PHOBIAS – NOISES AND PLACES

For an introduction to this topic please see our handout on fears, phobias and anxieties in dogs and cats.

Why is my dog so frightened of loud noises such as thunder, firecrackers and loud vehicles?

Fears and phobias can develop from a single experience (one event learning) or from continued exposure to the fearful stimulus. Although some dogs react with a mild fear response of panting and pacing, others get extremely agitated and may panic and become destructive. These dogs are experiencing a phobic response to the stimulus. These phobias may develop because of an inherent sensitivity to the stimulus (i.e. a genetic predisposition) or exposure to a highly traumatic experience associated with the stimulus (e.g. a carport collapsing on the pet in a windstorm). With multiple exposures to a fearful event a dog may become more intensely reactive and receiving attention or affection by well meaning owners who are merely trying to calm the pet down may actually intensify the response. Over the first few years, there are a number of developmental stages when fears might arise. They might begin to arise as the sensitive period for socialization and the fear stages emerge between two and four months of age, may begin to emerge with increasing maturity (six to 12 months of age) or may not emerge until behavioral maturity at 18 months to three years of age. These fears may slowly progress in intensity over the years, or may suddenly seem to intensify, especially if there has been a particularly unpleasant experience. However, fears that



begin to emerge well into the adult or senior years, might be related to medical problems that lead to painful conditions, altered mentation as might be associated with diseases that affect neurological function, declining senses, endocrine imbalances or cognitive dysfunction.

What can I do to prevent or reduce fears and phobias from arising?

This is discussed in some detail in our handout on canine socialization and fear prevention. These include the genetics of the individual (pet selection), positive early handling, understanding the developmental stages of dogs, understanding learning principles (see our handouts on reward training and desensitization and counter-conditioning), exposing your dog to a wide variety of stimuli during the primary socialization period and insuring positive outcome, avoiding negative outcomes, and working slowly to calm and settle pets when they are fearful or anxious (rather than to discipline or punish).

What can I do if my dog is fearful or phobic?

When interacting with a pet that is exhibiting fear and anxiety, there are two critical issues that first need to be addressed. If there is the potential for danger or injury to the dog or others, then safety is an overriding concern. (A number of situations in which a dog might be aggressive, and fear of social stimuli are discussed in other handouts). Your response to the pet is the second important factor since any anxiety, threats or punishment (which might be understandable if you are worried or frustrated) are counterproductive since they will further aggravate the pet's fear and anxiety. Therefore, to achieve the desired outcome, you will need to control and train your dog with techniques that calm and settle. Before getting started please review our handouts on settle exercises, handling exercises, and behavior modification.

Dogs that experience phobias often need professional intervention by a veterinary or applied animal behaviorist. These pets are usually at risk of harming themselves or property when faced with the stimulus especially if their owners are not home. If the dog will be left alone in a situation where it may encounter the phobic stimulus, drug therapy may be needed to prevent injury and destruction. See our handout on emergency or temporary procedures for fireworks and storm phobias.

Is there any way I can treat my dog myself?

To begin with you must identify all stimuli that evoke the behavior. For gunshots, fireworks or a car backfiring the stimulus might be quite obvious. However, for thunderstorms, it may be the darkening of the sky, a drop in the barometric pressure, or high winds, all of which occur prior to the storm. Naturally, the storm itself and the rain, wind, lightening, static electricity, and thunder can all be stimuli for the behavior. Some dogs even become phobic of going outdoors because of certain sights or sounds that you will need to identify.

In order to set up an effective retraining program you will need to be able to reproduce the stimuli. Finding a means of reproducing and controlling the stimulus is one of the most difficult aspects of the retraining program. A recording or video might work best for thunderstorms. Unfortunately, as discussed, many dogs are afraid of other components of a storm that are difficult to recreate. Therefore it may be possible to treat some, but not all aspects of the phobic response. Recordings may be useful for desensitizing dogs to the sound of fireworks, and the visual stimuli can be minimized by confining the dog to a brightly lit room with light proof shutters or shades. For gunshots, recordings or a starter pistol set inside 4 or 5 nested cardboard boxes, might be a way to reduce and control the stimulus. Sometimes, increasing the distance from the stimulus or finding some relatively soundproofed room to do the training might work.

If a recording is used, you will first need to ensure that it does indeed reproduce the fear by exposing the dog to the recording at a level at which the fear response is exhibited. Then, to begin to desensitize the pet you will need to begin retraining with the recording at a low enough level that it does not evoke the response and the dog is rewarded lavishly for good (non-fearful) behavior (Desensitization). Retraining should focus on the use of rewards and training the dog to lie quietly in a favorite resting area to receive rewards such as chew toys even before the stimulus (e.g. recording) is first used. In short, if you cannot get your pet to settle and calm before you begin these exposure exercises, you are not likely ready to begin the exposure training. This can be accomplished with reward training, head halters and / or physical handling exercises (See our handouts on settle training and handling / SOFT exercises and TTouch). By using a specific resting site, bedding area for training, the site itself may help to provide comfort and security for the dog, during exposure to stimuli. When the dog will settle and relax in the area, the stimuli can be gradually introduced and the dog's favored rewards (as determined by reinforcer gradient) paired with each exposure to the recording (counter-conditioning). Gradually, the volume is increased so that the dog learns to tolerate the "storm". Also be certain that the pet exhibits an appropriate behavioral response with each gradient of exposure. Your goal is to encourage calm and relaxed behavior although playing with a food toy or favored chew, would also be appropriate responses (response substitution). See our handout on systematic desensitization for further information.

Another reason why it is extremely difficult to overcome fears and phobias is that while you are attempting to desensitize and counter-condition, your dog is likely to be exposed to a recurrence of the actual event (e.g. a thunderstorm). At these times, your response can actually serve to aggravate the problem. You must be certain not to reinforce the fearful and phobic responses as this just encourages your pet to seek out your attention during storms. Remember your goal is to teach your dog where to settle and how to relax during storms. On the other hand, getting angry or frustrated with your dog will only serve to increase the fear. Therefore, at first ignoring your dog may be best. However, if the fear is too intense or there is the possibility of harm to your pet, you will need to have a plan for helping your dog settle until the training begins to take effect. Placing your dog in its favored resting area in a room or area that has been sound-proofed, applying a head halter if that has been used as a means of training and settling your dog, and playing some calming music may help to decrease the dog's reaction. An antistatic mat or cape has also been suggested to eliminate the possibility that static may be a factor. Drug therapy and pheromones may also be useful in some cases. Also see our handout on emergency procedures for fireworks and storm phobias.



Why would my dog become frightened of certain places?

Lack of early exposure to the sights, sounds or perhaps odors of a particular location, or one or more traumatic experiences associated with that location could lead to fear. The fear may be aggravated by an owner who gets upset and frustrated by the dog's behavior. Many dogs also learn that the intensity of their response will result in the removal from the situation. For example, dogs may be frightened of traveling in the car because they become car sick or

because the car ride is always followed by an unpleasant experience (such as boarding or a veterinary visit). Your dog may also become fearful of the veterinary hospital if it is always associated with unpleasant experiences, or of a particular room or area of the house (such as a basement or a cage) if an unpleasant event has occurred in that area. Some dogs even become frightened of the outdoors, because of unpleasant experiences that have occurred there.

How can I treat my dog's fear of places?

It is necessary to place the stimuli along a gradient, as well as to carefully observe your dog's response. For example, the dog may walk into the garage okay, but begins to get agitated when approaching the car. Or, the dog may be okay approaching the car and only upset when forced to get in.

Desensitization and counter-conditioning are used to retrain the dog. Begin with a dog that can be calmed on command in the absence of stimuli. The goal, before beginning the exposure is that a calm, positive state can be achieved consistently on command. (See our handout on settle training). Then train the dog using favored rewards beginning with situations where the fear is very mild. For example, with fear of car rides, the dog might first be rewarded for approaching, settling and relaxing when it is 10 feet from the car and slowly progressing to lying beside the car for favored rewards with no signs of fear. Leash and head halter may help to keep your dog focused and more effectively achieve the desired behavior. Favored rewards (based on reinforcer assessment) and saved exclusively for this training can help the dog make positive associations with the car. Next progress to sitting in the car and relaxing for favored rewards. While encouraging your dog to enter the car for favored treats or toys would work best, some very mild encouragement or lifting might be appropriate if the fear has become sufficiently mild. However, the session should not end until the dog is relaxed and taking treats or playing with a favored chew or toy. Further desensitization and counter-conditioning would progress to training with the door closed, training with the motor on, putting the car into gear, backing in and out of the driveway and for short trips. Although the goal is to always remain at or below the threshold, in practice if the pet is being exposed to a mildly fearful stimulus it may settle with continued exposure (flooding). As long as the session ends with a calm or happy dog, you should be ready for repeating that level of exposure or gradually moving to a higher intensity stimulus. Dogs that are crate trained and those that are harness trained may feel more secure if trained to wear a seat belt harness or travel in their own crates. Drugs and pheromones might help to improve success (see below). It is important to allow the dog to be relaxed and settled not only at the end of the session but also between sessions. Repetition of training when the dog is still agitated will make the dog more sensitive rather than less.

How do I deal with fear of the veterinary office?

For the dog that is fearful of the veterinary office, again it is first necessary for you to control and calm your dog in the absence of any fear evoking stimuli. A head halter can help to insure that your dog learns, focuses and neither escapes nor injures should the fear become too excessive. However, should this occur you are progressing too quickly in your training, remember the goal is to proceed slowly and always end on a positive note. For veterinary clinic fears you might begin to travel by car or foot in the direction of the veterinary clinic, past the veterinary clinic or into the parking lot for your initial desensitization and counter-conditioning. Again your dog's favored rewards should be identified and saved exclusively for this training. Progress up the walkway, onto the porch, into the reception area, and ultimately interact with staff, all in a calm and positive manner. The more the dog is relaxed and enjoys the experience the faster you are likely to progress. Additional stimuli such as veterinary instruments (e.g. stethoscope, lights), staff uniforms, the scale or the examination table would also be steps through which it would be ideal to progress. For some dogs it might take multiple visits with only minimal increments of

increased intensity, while other dogs once they settle and take rewards may be able to progress through a few of these steps at the same visit. Ultimately training should progress to the examination area, and to some brief handling. Desensitization and counter-conditioning programs will generally be successful if the owner has the time and patience and understanding to proceed slowly. However, a difficult hurdle to overcome in any program to reduce fear and anxiety is an even bigger hurdle is when the pet might need to be exposed to the clinic environment or staff and is not yet through the training program. In these cases, leash and head halter or muzzle control (to prevent escape and possible injury) and sedation or anesthesia to perform procedures would be warranted. See our handout on desensitization to the veterinary clinic.

Might drugs be helpful?

For pets that are excessively fearful, phobic or anxious, drugs might be helpful to reduce the state of anxiety and help the pet more quickly cope with the situation. While drugs may reduce anxiety in general, behavior modification is needed to help the pet adapt to the specific stimuli that are leading to the fear. Anti-anxiety drugs such as the benzodiazepines might work for situational anxieties since they take a very short time to reach efficacy and wear off fairly quickly. However, there can be a rebound effect as they wear off (and an increase in anxiety); they may result in disinhibition so that a pet that is fearful may lose their inhibitions and become aggressive; and they have inconsistent effects with each pet ranging from anxiety relief and muscle relaxation to sedation to increased agitation. In addition pets on benzodiazepines might not be able to remember what they learn so gradually lower doses will need to be used once training has been successful. Buspirone (which is non-sedating but might also disinhibit), DAP pheromone spray, and natural products such as melatonin might also help. Perhaps the most successful use of drugs might be to use an antidepressant to help control anxiety and reduce outbursts but these can take months to achieve effect and other drugs may need to be used concurrently for more immediate relief. When using medication it is possible that the lessons learned may not transfer to the non-medicated state and the problem behavior might return. Therefore gradual dose reductions might be recommended to determine whether the medication can be successfully withdrawn and if not, what would be the lowest effective medication dose.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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