

Dog: Fearful Behavior



How to Recognize Fearful Behavior

The body language of a shy, anxious, or afraid dog is sometimes obvious—and other times it isn't. Here are some examples of behavior that could be signs of fear:

- Panting, licking lips, whining, drooling
- Shaking, cowering, tucking tail, ears back or flat
- Not accepting a treat
- Yawning, panting, pacing
- Moving slowly or stalling in walks
- Hypervigilance: looking in many directions (checking for an escape route)
- Hiding or trying to escape
- Submissive urination or defecation
- Snarling, growling, or barking
- Avoiding hands or other contact
- Destroying things, self-mutilation

If you see any of these behaviors, first consult your veterinarian to rule out medical causes.

The Big 'Why' Question

Fear is a common and perfectly normal, innate, and adaptive behavior in all animals. However, if fear isn't addressed, it can develop into serious behavioral and health problems, so if your dog is showing fear or shyness, you should always deal with it proactively.

Although it's possible that a fearful dog has suffered abuse or bad experiences, most of the time fears result from a combination of a genetic predisposition and some lack of exposure with positive experiences, especially in the first months of life. For instance, a dog may have missed out on becoming socialized to certain kinds of people simply by not being around them enough when he was a puppy.

For severe shyness and fear disorders, get help from SF SPCA's board-certified veterinary behavior specialist. Don't live in the Bay Area? Search locally for a veterinary behavior specialist (Dip ACVB), a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB), or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT). Or check our website for shy dog seminars and group classes. If your dog shows mild to moderate shyness or fear, here are some pointers:

Different Kinds of Shyness

The most common kinds of shyness in dogs are:

Social shyness, where the dog is fearful of unfamiliar people or certain kinds of people. Dogs like this are sometimes described as "taking a while to warm up," or "one-man dogs." They are usually fine with certain people once they get to know them. Examples are dogs that are afraid of men or men with beards, dogs that are uncomfortable around children, and dogs that bark at the sight of people with unusual gaits. Dogs can also be shy with other dogs.

Environmental or context fears, where the dog is afraid in certain environments or situations. Examples are dogs that are afraid of going to the vet, panic during car rides, or are uncomfortable in new places.

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Sound sensitivities, where the dog is afraid of sudden loud noises. These dogs flatten and try to escape when a car backfires, or pace and salivate during thunderstorms or fireworks.

Helping the Shy Dog

Avoid coercion. Never force your dog into scary situations. As tempting as it might be to soothe him with hugs, scrub him in the bath, or take him to people's houses, let him go at his own pace. Wait for him to come to you, walk him on quiet streets, allow him to decide when he's ready to greet your friends or strangers on the street. Provide a safe environment so your dog can get more comfortable.

Hand-feed your dog. If your dog is fearful of reaching hands, hand-feeding treats and meals can help. At first, talk to your dog while you feed him piece by piece. After a session or two, try touching him with your other hand before each treat. If he moves away, go back to feeding him without touching him a few more times and then try a smaller touch before feeding. This way he learns that good things predictably come from your hands.

If your dog is extremely fearful and hides, you can toss treats near his hiding place and then leave him alone. Once he feels better, he'll venture out. In time, his forays out will happen sooner after you toss treats and your presence will become associated with the treats. Once he is out, switch to hand feeding.

Find safe distances. Take walks around the neighborhood and let your dog sniff and check things out. Sudden noises or changes in the environment will likely make him flatten or try to run for cover. Your best policy is to let him hide or to take him farther away from the scary situation. If he settles down, encourage him to approach as close as he is comfortable to what frightened him. Feed him a few treats and then leave.

Be careful of people who think they are "good with dogs" and try to approach him too quickly or too closely. Being forced into more than he can handle is never therapeutic and can make him worse. Coach people on how to remain passive and let your dog set the pace of contact. A good idea is to carry treats for people to toss to him—if he won't eat, it's a sign that he needs even more distance. Get him far enough away that he's relaxed enough to eat as this helps him develop a positive association to new people.

Most importantly: Build confidence. Environmental enrichment, practicing new skills and having positive experiences with what frightens your dog at an intensity he can handle is the best way to build confidence in a shy dog. A few suggestions that often help: Free-shaping tricks and new behaviors using a clicker, dog-dog play, and agility training. We offer clicker, tricks, agility, nose works, and many other classes to help provide structure and support for people working with shy dogs.

Tip

- Patience and compassion are key. Helping a shy dog is a long, slow process in most cases. If the dog seems fearful in most live situations he might suffer from anxiety and distress which is harmful to the body and might require medication to help with any behavior modification plans.