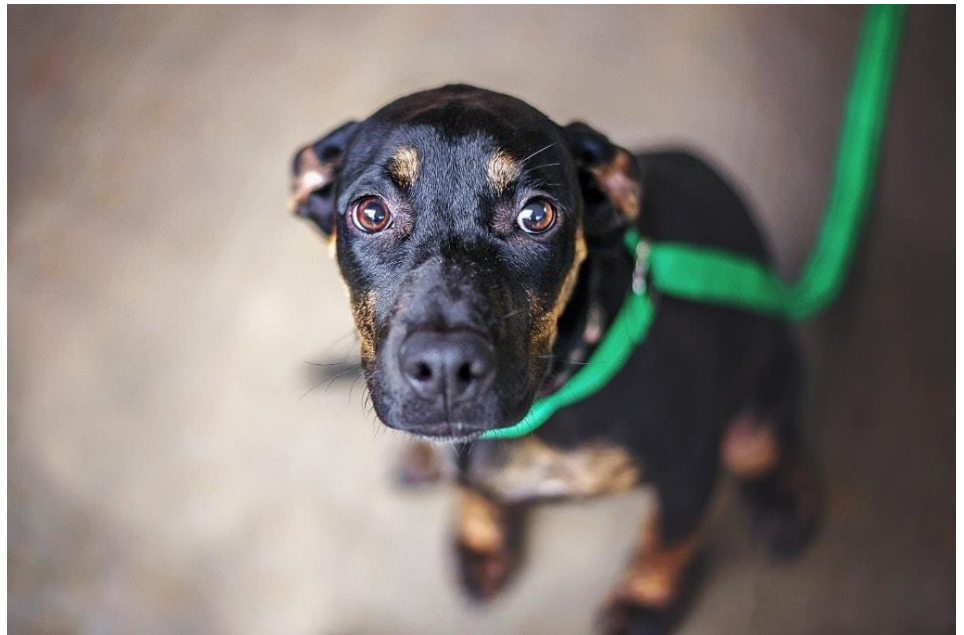


Fearful Dog

What is fearful behaviour?

When dogs anticipate danger or a threat, their defence mechanism is to react in a fearful manner. This can be a response to a stimulus the dog is uncertain of, either from previous negative experiences or having no experience with the stimulus at all. Some of these fearful behaviours can turn into something problematic, so it's important to understand what may make our dog fearful and how to change and manage this behaviour.



Some dogs may display fearful behaviour towards:

- Unfamiliar noises/objects, or noises/objects they associate with a stressful experience
- Unfamiliar people or dogs, or people and dogs they associate with a stressful experience
- Unfamiliar environments, or places they may or may not associate with a stressful experience, such as car, vet, groomer, new neighbourhood, shelter, new home, etc.

Some fearful behaviours that dogs exhibit may be due to:

- Lack of direction from dog's owner; too much freedom may cause anxiety in dogs
- Conflicting direction from owner(s)
- Inconsistent handling and attitude from owner, e.g. over-affectionate, then unduly corrective
- Being left alone, especially if they are accustomed to co-existing with other animals or people

Visit your veterinarian

If your dog is showing fearful behaviour or newly developed fear, it's a good idea to make a trip to your veterinarian to determine if there is an underlying medical reason for it or if medication is needed to help manage it.

How to help your fearful dog

Start by figuring out what their triggers are, so you can address what is making them fearful and make them feel safe. Other ways to help are:

- Not taking them to places that they deem fearful, such as a busy street or a dog park
- Making sure you are being vigilant in your surroundings and watching for your dog's trigger(s)
- Doing some positive reinforcement foundation skill training, such as sit, down, stay, etc., to help build their confidence
- Playing interactive games like tug-o-war and fetch or hiding treats throughout the house and having your dog search for them



Have a consistent routine

Having a routine can be very helpful for a fearful dog, so they know what is going to happen and aren't focusing on the uncertainty. Set your dog up for success by ensuring routine events such as meals, walks, playtime or training occur at consistent times through the day.

Fearful signs to look for

It's very important that you are able to identify fearful dog body language, so you can respond appropriately. Some common signs of fearful behaviour in dogs are:

- Panting
- Closed mouth
- Licking lips
- Shaking
- Tucking tail
- Ears back
- Yawning
- Not accepting treats
- Hiding or trying to escape a situation
- Snarling, growling or barking

Recognize triggers and be proactive

Once you identify your dog's fear triggers, do what is necessary to reduce their exposure to them. If your dog is scared of the sight and sound of the garbage truck, you can draw curtains and shut windows to block out or minimize the trigger. If your dog is fearful of unfamiliar visitors, create a comfortable, private area for them where they can relax and be calm when you have guests over.

Desensitization and counter-conditioning

Desensitization and counter-conditioning is a way to help treat fearful or other unwanted behaviour in dogs, in which you slowly and at a low intensity introduce them to their triggers while giving them something they find pleasurable, such high-value treats.

For example, if your dog is fearful of other dogs you are not going to take them to an off-leash dog park. Instead, take them to an area where they can see other dogs at a distance "under threshold," which means remaining calm and without fear. When they see or look at other dogs without being triggered, you immediately reward their calm response with something of high value (hot dogs or chicken). This way, we can begin to change their negative association to a positive one.

Say no to punishment

We have to understand that fearful dogs are stressed and display a lack confidence. Their fearful reaction to certain triggers is involuntarily, which means it's something out of their control. This is why it's important that we do not punish them for fearful behaviour, as it can down the road lead to aggressive behaviour.

