

# Calming the Fearful Dog



**F**EAR COMES IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES, especially for your furry, four-pawed friend. Whether in response to a stranger or startling noise, your dog may display certain body postures, including lowering his head, flattening his ears back against his head, and tucking his tail between his legs if he's scared.

A frightened dog may also pant, salivate, tremble, pace, or try to escape. He may show submissive behaviors—avoiding eye contact, urinating submissively, or rolling over to expose his belly—or he may freeze and remain immobile. Some dogs will bark or growl at the feared object. In extreme cases of fearfulness, a dog may be destructive (out of general anxiety or in an attempt to escape), or he may lose control of his bladder or bowels.

## Causes of Fearful Behavior

Determining why your dog is fearful is helpful but not always essential to treating the fearful behavior, although the reason for his fear will dictate the relative success of the treatment. A dog who is genetically predisposed to general fearfulness, or a dog who was improperly socialized during a critical stage in his development, will probably not respond as well to treatment as a dog who has developed a fear in response to a specific experience. It's essential, however, to first rule out any medical causes for your dog's fearful behavior. Your first step should be to take your dog to your veterinarian for a thorough medical evaluation.

## What You Can Do

Most fears won't go away by themselves and, if left untreated, may get worse. Some fears, when treated, will decrease in intensity or frequency but may not disappear entirely. After you've ruled out medical causes, your first

step in dealing with your dog's fearful behavior is to identify what triggers his fear. Is he afraid of startling noises? Is he afraid of being left alone? If your dog's fears are rooted in either of these scenarios, see our related tip sheets on these topics. Most fears can be treated using desensitization and counterconditioning techniques, which require time and patience. You may need help from a professional animal-behavior specialist with these techniques.

## How to Use the Desensitization Technique

- Begin by exposing your dog to a very low level or small amount of whatever is causing his fear. For example, if he is afraid of bicycles, start with a bicycle placed at a distance of 100 feet from your dog.
- Reward him for calm, nonfearful behavior in the presence of the bicycle. Gradually move the bicycle closer to him. As long as your dog remains relaxed, reward him with treats and praise. If at any point he becomes anxious, move the bicycle further away and proceed at a slower pace.
- When your dog can remain relaxed in the presence of a stationary bicycle, move the bicycle 100 feet away again, but have someone ride it slowly by him. Again, gradually increase the proximity of the slowly moving bicycle, rewarding your dog for remaining calm and relaxed. Repeat this procedure as many times as

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