

Behavior modification for dogs with fear and phobias toward noises and locations

There are many different stimuli that can frighten your dog. This handout is designed to develop a program for improving or resolving fear of inanimate stimuli such as places, noises, or objects. When the fear is severe, it may be too intense for your dog's well-being and impractical for you to improve without combining a drug or natural supplement with the behavior program. Once a pet becomes fearful of something, that fear can be generalized so that it occurs in response to a variety of other noises, locations, or unusual situations. In addition, each exposure to the fear-eliciting stimulus with a negative outcome further increases the fear. Therefore avoidance is essential until improvement can be made.

Treatment of fear

In simple terms, the pet must be exposed to the fear-evoking stimulus at a great enough distance or reduced volume that it is not fearful. If the association with the stimulus can be turned into one that is positive, the pet may develop a positive attitude to the stimulus.

Desensitization is used in combination with counterconditioning to change a pet's attitude or "feeling" about the stimulus from one that is negative to one that is positive. Desensitization involves controlled exposure to situations or stimuli that are weaker or milder than will cause fear. Counterconditioning is then used to change the dog's response to the stimulus by associating a favored reward with each exposure to the stimulus. The dog is then gradually introduced to similar but progressively more intense stimuli paired together with the presentation of the favored reward. If an inappropriate response (fear, escape attempts, aggression) is exhibited then an attempt should be made to distract and calm the dog, or remove the dog to a distance or location where it can be successfully calmed.

Response substitution involves training the dog to behave in a calm and relaxed manner (sit, settle, go to a mat, walk on loose leash) and then engaging it in a behavior that is incompatible with the fear response for rewards when exposed to the fearful stimulus. Response substitution is likely to be effective if the dog is consistently responsive to the training and the exposure to the fear is at a low enough level that the dog can be successfully cued to respond to the command. A head halter and leash can be used to ensure success and high-valued rewards (clicker training may be helpful) used to mark and reinforce an acceptable relaxed response.

Any exposure to the fear-eliciting stimulus before you are able to calm your dog will worsen the fear and anxiety. Be certain stimuli are well controlled, and mild enough so that your pet is less likely to be reactive. Do not plan any exposures unless you are confident you can achieve a positive endpoint. Since a dog's response is also influenced by your emotional state and the behavior of the people or other animals to whom your dog is being exposed, any threats, agitated behavior, or punishment will further aggravate the problem.

Steps for treating a pet that is fearful of inanimate objects and sounds

1. Know the signs of fear: Identify all stimuli and situations that cause the pet to be fearful. Remember that multiple stimuli may add to the fearful response so that each stimulus should be identified separately. For example, a pet that is fearful of a vacuum cleaner might be afraid of the sound, sight, or motion of the vacuum cleaner. Pets fearful of thunder may also react to the rain, lightning, darkness, barometric pressure or electric charges.
2. Prevent your dog from experiencing the stimuli except during counterconditioning. This may be difficult for certain phobias such as thunderstorms so that medication and products might be needed to help calm your pet or reduce exposure to the stimuli. Confinement to an area where sounds or sight of the stimuli can be avoided, using music or white noise to reduce external sounds, calming caps or goggles that reduce visual stimuli, ear bands or muffs that reduce audible stimuli or calming shirts or wraps, might aid in reducing the level to one that is tolerable for the dog.
3. Train the dog to relax or settle on command, in the absence of any fear-evoking stimuli (see Box 7.2, client handout #23, for training dogs to settle, and client handout #13 on structured interactive training, C.14, available online). Begin in an environment where the dog is calm, focused, and has minimal distractions. Gradually proceed to progressively more distracting locations and situations. The initial conditioning should be done by family members with whom the pet is calmest, most controlled, and responsive. For some dogs, using a head halter improves the speed and safety of training. Implementing a program of predictable interactions where all affection and social rewards are only given for calm and focused behaviors helps to reduce anxiety both by giving the pet control over its rewards and by ensuring that only calm behaviors get rewarded. Practice the training in a variety of environments using treats or toys as rewards. Consider clicker training to be able to immediately reward and gradually shape more relaxed responses when at a distance from your pet.

4. For storm and firework phobias, it can be particularly useful to train the pet to settle or go to a location where it feels comfortable and secure, and where the auditory and visual stimuli can be minimized, such as a crate with a blanket or cardboard appliance box as cover. In addition, positive cues can be implemented that further calm and distract the dog. This can be accomplished by pairing a CD, video, white noise, or even a towel or blanket that has the owner's scent with each positive settle training session. Encourage the dog to enter voluntarily by placing its favored chews and food-filled toys in the area.
5. Each stimulus that leads to fear must be identified and placed along a gradient from mildest to strongest. It will be necessary to reproduce the stimuli so that they can be muted or minimized and presented in a controlled manner. An audio recording or video might be a good starting point for conditioning to the sound of the stimulus. If a pet is afraid of the sound, sight, and movement of the vacuum cleaner, then these may all need to be controlled and introduced separately.
6. Determine the pet's favored rewards and save these for retraining and counterconditioning. For some pets, food is the strongest reward while others may be more responsive to a favored play toy. The reward should be presented each time the pet settles in response to the stimulus. Always train with a quiet, relaxed, upbeat tone of voice.
7. If the pet responds fearfully as you proceed slowly through more intense stimuli, stop the exposure, wait till the pet is fully calm and reward. the stimulus can be reintroduced at a slightly lower level, and desensitization and counterconditioning can resume.
8. Once each stimulus has been presented along a gradient of increasingly stronger stimuli and the pet acts calmly and takes rewards in the presence of each stimulus, the separate elements can then be combined and gradually introduced as a group (e.g., vacuum turned on and moving).

Considerations

If the stimulus evokes a strong anxiety response at the beginning of the training session, then the stimulus is not sufficiently muted. It may be necessary to redesign the stimulus gradient so that a slower, more cautious approach can be taken. A leash and head halter might also be used to improve success. Clicker training might also be implemented to help precisely time rewards.