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Top of Form

Bottom of Form

**Helping Your Fearful Dog**

It’s not easy being a fearful dog and it’s not easy caring for one. Below are some important steps we can take to help dogs who struggle with their environment feel safe and be successful in our world.

**UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUR DOG IS TELLING YOU**

When I first started working with my fearful dog I often struggled to understand his behavior. I remember thinking, “if only he could tell me what he’s thinking and what he needs.” Well guess what? He was. I just didn’t know how to fully understand his language at the time.

Dogs don’t speak English, but they communicate volumes with their body language and behavior. The first and most important step to living with any dog, and especially a fearful dog, is to learn to read their body language.

Most people agree that a dog with their tail tucked between their legs is afraid, however, given the high number of preventable dog bites that occur every day across this country, most of us aren’t as savvy at reading the more subtle signs of stress and avoidance that often precede more overt aggression.

[A group of dogs with different facial expressions

Description automatically generated](http://vetbehaviourteam.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/VBT-FACIAL-STRESS.pdf)

Being able to identify when your dog is feeling stressed or uncomfortable is essential to setting them up for success and keeping them safe.

Here are some of my favorite resources on dog body language:

[Silent Conversations: Introduction to Dog Body Language](https://www.silentconversations.com/introduction-to-dog-body-language/)

[Center for Shelter Dogs: Dog Communication and Body Language](https://centerforshelterdogs.tufts.edu/dog-behavior/dog-communication-and-body-language/)

[Vet Behavior Team: Dog Behavior Factsheets](http://www.vetbehaviourteam.com/client-handouts/)

[Doggie Drawings by Lili Chin](https://www.doggiedrawings.net/freeposters)

**DECREASE STRESS**

When your dog is exposed to a stressful event— be it another dog rushing up to them on the street, a stranger suddenly petting their head, or a visit to the vet —their body experiences a stress response.

During a stress response the sympathetic nervous system is activated and stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, are released. This is known as “fight or flight” and is accompanied by a range of physiological changes, including increased heart rate and blood pressure, dilated pupils, inhibition of digestion and immunity, and an increased threshold for pain.

Dogs will often be unable to focus on the handler, respond to cues, or eat in moments of heightened stress because their focus is on addressing the threat in front of them. And it doesn’t matter whether this threat is real or perceived: the stress response is the same.

Moreover, according to Robert Sapolsky in his acclaimed book *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers*, “the stress-response can be mobilized not only in response to physical or psychological insults, but also in expectation of them.” In other words, anticipation of a stressful event can be equally as stressful as the event itself.

Why is this important? Because consistent exposure to stressors will lead to a repeated activation of the stress response in your dog’s body, which will have serious implications on their long-term behavioral health.

It takes an average of 60-90 minutes for stress hormones to leave the body after a moderately stressful, but not traumatic, event. If the exposure to stressful events is repeated, the stress response is activated frequently with a constant spike in stress hormones in the body. This leads to [trigger stacking](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFGIRPAWcSM) and chronic stress.

Chronic stress suppresses the immune system, impedes learning, affects metabolism and digestion, and ultimately [shortens our dogs’ lifespan](https://centerforshelterdogs.tufts.edu/blog/can-stress-and-fear-affect-the-lifespan-of-dogs-what-about-humans/).

I can’t emphasize this enough—*decreasing stress is one of the most essential steps to helping your fearful dog.*

We can help decrease stress in two ways:

First, minimize exposure to things that are stressful or scary for your dog.

Make a list of people, spaces, and environments that are most challenging for your dog and come up with a plan for how you will manage their day-to-day to minimize exposure to those triggers.

Although we can’t always avoid all stress, you’d be surprised how a little creative thinking and environmental management can help set our dogs up for success and improve their behavioral wellness.

Second, provide decompression.

Decompression can come in the form of mental stimulation and [enrichment](https://www.dogmindedboston.com/enrichment), including licking, chewing, scavenging, sniffing and [decompression walks](https://www.dogmindedboston.com/blog/2019/5/27/the-life-changing-power-of-decompression-walks), and in the form of rest and quiet time.

Decompression should always follow a stressful event, to the extent possible. If your dog just experienced something scary or had a reactive episode, think carefully about what the rest of their day or at least the following few hours are going to look like. Adjust accordingly.

Our goal is to keep their [stress tub](http://reactivechampion.blogspot.com/2013/06/the-stress-bathtub.html) as empty as we can. We must allow for recovery and decompression after stressful events and we must be proactive about thinking this through.

**KEEP YOUR DOG FEELING SAFE**

The emphasis here is on *feeling.* It doesn’t matter whether we think our dogs are safe, what matters is that they *feel* safe.

Too often I hear people refer to their fearful dogs as “dramatic” or “crazy.” The Internet is filled with “funny” videos of dogs reacting fearfully to everyday items such Roombas, brooms, plants, toys, etc. But there’s nothing humorous about fear. The sooner we take our dogs’ fears seriously, the sooner we can help them feel safe.

I shared this post a few months ago, and I will reiterate the points I made again:

You may need to walk your dog at a different time of day or in a different neighborhood.

You may need to drive your dog to walk them in a place that’s quiet or less stressful.

You may need to decline requests to pet your dog, no matter how much the friendly stranger tells you that dogs love them.

You may need to keep your dog in another room with a yummy Kong when people or children visit your home.

You may need to keep your dog at home instead of taking them to a busy event, restaurant, or out on the town.

You may need to avoid dog parks and daycares.

These don’t always need to be permanent solutions, but until your dog gains comfort in these situations, you need to keep them feeling safe.

**GIVE YOUR DOG CHOICES**

One of the goals we have for fearful dogs is to help them become more resilient as they move through the world.

Resilience can mean your dog’s recovery time is decreasing and they’re able to re-engage with you and their environment quicker after a stressful event. It can mean your dog is more likely to explore or approach novel stimuli. It can also mean your dog is able to relax and settle in formerly stressful situations.

Dr. Susan Friedman defines resilience as “a function of ratio of control to helplessness.” In other words, if we want to increase our dogs’ resilience, we need to allow them to have greater control over their environment and behavioral outcomes.

One important way to do this is by giving our dogs more choices.

Given that we control every aspect of their lives, there are plenty of opportunities for us to increase choice for our dogs. Here are some examples:

Let your dog choose where to walk, what to sniff, and whether to walk at all.

Let your dog opt in and out of training sessions.

Let your dog cooperate in their handling, grooming, and veterinary care.

Let your dog decide if they want to interact with people or dogs.

Let your dog choose how to spend their time by giving them a safe space in the home where no one can bother them.

Most importantly, *always allow your fearful dog to remove themselves from a stressful situation or interaction.*

Since so much of traditional dog training is centered on obedience and control, it may take a bit of a mindset shift for some of us to allow our dogs to make more choices. But believe me when I say, a dog who is allowed to say “no” is far more likely to say “yes.”

This is because choice is a primary reinforcer. As Dr. Friedman [writes](http://www.behaviorworks.org/files/articles/Back%20in%20the%20Black%20BT.pdf), “research demonstrates that control over consequences is a primary reinforcer, meaning it’s essential to survival like food, water and shelter.”

The more our dogs can feel in control of their environment (and their bodies), the safer they will feel, and the more resilient they will become.

**EMPLOY HUMANE BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION**

Humane, positive reinforcement-based behavior modification centers on changing the underlying emotional associations fearful dogs have with environmental triggers through desensitization and counter-conditioning protocols.

A dog who is no longer afraid of a person approaching them doesn’t have a reason to bark, lunge, or growl.

This most often involves using food (and plenty of it) to help condition a different emotional response and teaching dogs what we want them *to do*in situations that once provoked unwanted behaviors.

Humane behavior modification can also include behavioral medication. In many cases where dogs struggle to cope with their environment, medication can be the [first course of action](https://www.drjensdogblog.com/behavior-medication-first-line-therapy-or-last-resort/), not the last.

Conversely, here’s what humane behavior modification doesn’t involve: corrections and punishment.

Training tools that cause discomfort and elicit fear avoidance, such as prong collars, e-collars, choke chains and slip leads, bark collars, shake cans, and other aversives, do nothing to help fearful dogs feel better about the things that scare them.

In fact, they do just the opposite. Adding an aversive stimulus to an already stressed and anxious animal can only [make their fear worse](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/decoding-your-pet/201412/it-makes-no-sense-punish-fearful-dog).

Similarly, forcing fearful dogs to encounter the fear-inducing stimulus above a threshold they can tolerate and preventing them from escaping it can profoundly increase their anxiety and stress and lead to [learned helplessness](https://www.britannica.com/science/learned-helplessness).

Remember, the dog training industry is unregulated, so be sure to look for a behavior professional who practices modern, positive reinforcement-based methods without the use of compulsion and aversive tools.

Please see the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior’s [Position Statement on the Use of Punishment for Behavior Modification in Animals](https://avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Punishment_Position_Statement-download_-_10-6-14.pdf).

**ADVOCATE FOR YOUR DOG**

The social pressure to have a perfect and “friendly” dog is real. Navigating the world with a less than a perfect dog is challenging. Navigating it with a fearful or reactive dog can be downright treacherous.

You will get unsolicited advice, your dog’s personal space will be invaded, and you will inevitably experience the shame that comes along with other people’s opinions. But if you don’t have your dog’s back, who will?

Don’t be afraid to advocate for your dog and do what’s going to keep them feeling safe, even if it makes someone else uncomfortable. Most importantly, trust that you know what’s best for your dog better than anyone else.

The ability to trust us and know that we won’t put them in situations they can’t handle is the most priceless gift we can give our fearful dogs.

**MEET YOUR DOG WHERE THEY ARE…TODAY**

I won’t lie, this can be hard. It’s hard because we have expectations—expectations of who are dogs should be, what life would be like with them, and of what progress will look like.

Living with a fearful dog often means letting go of some of these expectations and accepting the dog in front of you, just as they are.

I once dreamed about taking leisurely strolls around town with my dog at my side. Turns out, city life and high traffic areas just weren’t his jam. Instead, he taught me how to enjoy long hikes in the woods, rain or shine. What I found was the more we spent time in places where he felt safe and confident, the more his confidence grew overall.

And finally, the biggest lesson I learned caring for a fearful dog is that the fastest way to get there is the slowest.

Progress is real and progress is achievable, but progress will look different for every dog and we can’t dictate its pace no matter how badly we want to.

Progress is also never linear. Your dog will have good days and bad days. The beautiful thing is that the good days will eventually outnumber the bad, and one day you will wake up and notice that the cup you’ve been filling ever so slowly is fuller than you could have ever imagined.

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