



FEARFUL DOGS

By R. Hack, DVM, 2017

Your dog has an anxious and fearful temperament. Temperament in dogs is determined by three factors. The first is a genetic predisposition. Some breeds are not as good at communicating with other dogs or humans due to physical characteristics such as facial folds, amount of fur or difference in number of facial muscles. The second determination of temperament is epigenetics. Studies in dogs and humans have shown that if the mother is stressed during pregnancy, then the babies will not be able to deal as well with stress. This tolerance to stress may be passed on through multiple generations. The last contributing factor to temperament is the socialization period, which is significantly shorter than many people realize. This period lasts from 3-12 weeks in dogs. As dogs age toward physical maturity between the ages of 1 and 2, they begin to be more proactive toward the object of their fear. Many dogs are not aggressive as puppies, but begin to display aggression as they reach this age. Many dogs become increasingly proactive as they reach social maturity between 3 and 4 years of age.

There are four responses to fear. They are fight, flight, freeze, and fidget. Fight is aggressive behavior such as barking, lunging, growling, and biting, and is frequently misinterpreted as an expression of dominance. Dominance is an outdated way of looking at a social hierarchy that exists in wolves, and is no longer used in their wolves or dogs. Flight is hiding or running away from the stimulus. Freeze is a behavior where the dog feels like it has no option but to accept what is happening. Fidget is referred to by behaviorists as displacement behaviors. It is a normal behavior that is taken out of context because the dog has anxious energy and doesn't know what to do with that energy. The most common displacement behaviors are jumping, licking faces and hands, mouthing, mounting, or pacing.

There are two situations that generally cause fear and aggression related to fear in dogs. The first is a threat to their resources. Resources can be food, toys, resting places, or human attention. The other situation that causes fear is behavior by humans or dogs that your dog considers threatening.

Approaching your dog when she is unable to escape due to a leash or physical barrier, exaggerated or sudden hand movements, reaching toward her, bending from above, or direct stares can all be provocative behavior from a person or another dog, especially people or dogs that your dog does not know well.

Human and dog body language are significantly different. Actions that we do not perceive to be threatening can produce a fear response in your dog, especially if performed by someone that she doesn't know well. Examples of these actions are making eye contact, reaching over her, or changing body position. This can put her in an aroused state, where she is more prone to involuntary fearful behavior.



There is good stress, eustress, and bad stress, distress, and both cause the dog to produce the stress hormone, cortisol. Cortisol stays in the body for 1-3 days following a stressful incident, so your dog is likely to be more reactive to triggers during this time. Stressors can build up over the course of time causing your dog to react more intensely to certain stimuli than she would at other times. Many dogs feel more comfortable in their home environment and therefore are more likely to be proactive or aggressive than they are in other locations. It is also likely that her home is a more confined space, so your dog is more likely to display proactive behavior such as barking or biting, than she would elsewhere. Please keep a close eye on her in the future for any medical conditions as they can affect her ability to cope with stressful situations.

It is impossible to reinforce a fear response. If your dog is acting fearfully, you can comfort her or give her treats without concern that the fearful behavior, even aggression, will be encouraged. It is better if you can give a treat to her before she is over threshold, as she will be better able to learn in that moment. Once she is reacting to a stimulus, there is a significantly lower chance that your dog is able to learn, so removing her from the environment is best.

One of the things that can raise the baseline stress level in any dog is any type of punitive training. Many techniques in dog training fall into this category. Unfortunately, this type of training is relatively common and tends to increase fear and anxiety. There are also studies that show that these training methods increase the potential for aggression to the person giving the correction and any person present or event that occurs when the correction occurs.

Anxiety and aggression are treated using a combination of methods. These include avoiding the trigger of your dog's fear, training her to do a behavior that is incompatible with the current one, changing the environment so that your dog is able to learn, and sometimes, behavioral modification medication. It is likely that she will require lifelong management. Changes need to be made in the way that people and dogs interact with your dog. Making these changes will help to ensure that the potential for aggression is decreased, your dog is under better control, and improve her quality of life.

