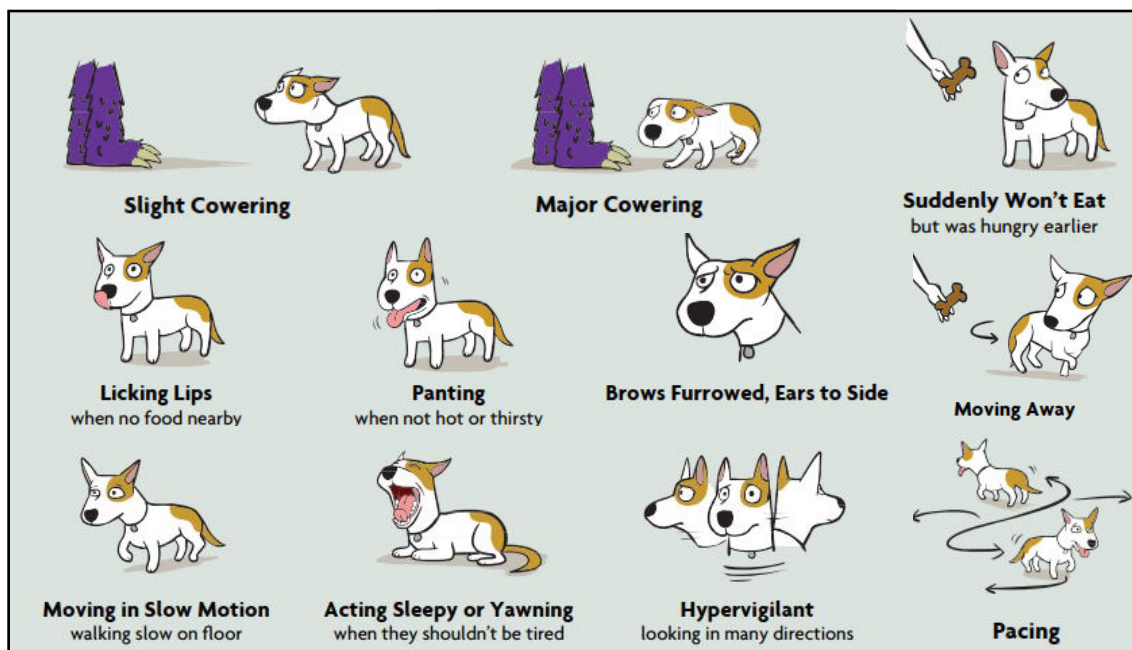


Caring for a Fearful Dog

Caring for a fearful dog can be just as challenging as it is rewarding. Helping them become more comfortable and confident in their bubble, and watching them learn to explore the world as they expand that bubble is an experience that makes it all worth it. Getting to that point, however, requires patience, observation, and an understanding that dogs who experience fear in the face of new people, animals, and environments, need more support and thoughtful management than an average dog.

Adjust your expectations: It's important to identify if your dog is uncomfortable with things that other, more outgoing dogs are not. Having accurate expectations for where you will be able to go and what you will be able to do with your dog is the first step in helping them. If you were hoping for a dog that will accompany you to busy family gatherings, that will run and greet guests as they enter your house, or that will confidently walk alongside you as you navigate a busy street, you'll need to adjust your thinking in order for this dog to be successful. There is certainly a chance that your dog will get to the point where they are comfortable with all of those things, but they won't get there if they aren't allowed to progress at their own speed. Pushing them past their comfort level by putting them in a difficult situation, or expecting that they will "get used" to something scary on their own, will only set them back, and will ultimately make things harder for everyone in the long run.

Reading body language: Once appropriate expectations have been set, the next step in helping a fearful dog is to identify when they are uncomfortable by reading their body language. Pay close attention to your dog's body language both when they are comfortable and when they are scared or nervous so that you can identify when they are having a hard time. It's also important to pay attention to what is going on in the environment when you notice your dog's fearful or nervous behavior. Those "triggers" will be useful tools when teaching your dog more confident, social behaviors. Secondly, you will need to closely manage your dog's environment so that they are not exposed to those things that make them afraid. When their environment is well managed, you can begin to introduce some targeted training to help them more comfortably navigate the world they live in.



CattleDog Publishing drsophiayin.com

Caring for a Fearful Dog

What can you do to change your dog's behavior? Consider how your dog is learning. Dogs do what works for them to get the consequences, or reinforcers, that they want. Behavior that is reinforced will continue to happen. If your dog wants distance from something that is making them uncomfortable, barking and growling or trembling and cowering might work to get that scary thing to go away. Or maybe those same behaviors work to get mom or dad to pet or pick them up. Think about what happens immediately after those fearful behaviors to identify what might be reinforcing them. If the behavior is reinforced, or if it worked to get what your dog wants, it is likely to continue. We can use this information to inform the decisions we make when training. Also note what happens just before the fearful behavior so that you can better anticipate and avoid those situations, this is referred to as management.

MANAGEMENT: It is imperative to constantly manage their environment – all day, every day!

- **At home:** Create a safe space in your home where your dog can always go to get away from something scary. A crate, a room, or a quiet corner of the house would work great. Only good things should ever happen in that space (meals, special chews, your dog's favorite toy, etc.), and they should always be able to come and go as they please. **Never** physically manipulate or force your dog to come out of their safe place.
- **Out in the world:** While your dog is learning to be more confident, limit exposure to things that are scary, and remember that your dog gets to decide what is scary, not you. Avoid busy parks or public places if a crowd of people is scary for your dog. If he's afraid of big loud trucks, don't go for walks on trash day. If they're afraid of other dogs, turn and walk the other direction if you see a dog approaching you. Do the best you can to prevent your dog from exhibiting those fearful behaviors *unless* you and your dog are both prepared to train.

TRAINING: In most cases, a dog has learned that those behaviors "work" to get whatever is scaring them to leave them alone. For example, if a big scary person carrying an umbrella approaches a nervous dog, then the dog growls and backs away, the big scary person is likely to leave that dog alone. In that case, growling and backing away were just reinforced by the distance provided when the scary person walked away. Distance reinforced the fearful behavior. Now, the next time the dog is in a similar situation, they are more likely to repeat that same fearful behavior.

When working with a dog who is nervous or fearful, we can use distance to reinforce more appropriate, social behavior in those same scenarios. Using the same reinforcer helps to create faster and longer lasting behavior change. To use this protocol, it is important that you first become familiar with your dog's body language. Take time to note what your dog looks like when both very calm/relaxed, and uncomfortable/fearful. Note what the eyes and mouth look like, how they carry their head, their breathing pattern, how they hold their tail, their overall posture, and any other behaviors that stand out to you. Note what is happening in the environment when their body changes.

This protocol can be used in just about any situation, as long as you have control over the distance between your dog and the thing that scares them. For example, if your dog is afraid of the garbage truck, that would *not* be the time to use this exercise, as you have no control over the garbage truck moving down the street. Alternatively, if your dog is afraid men who wear a hat, you can ask a friend to be an active participant in helping you train, as long as the friend will follow your instructions.

Caring for a Fearful Dog

Ask your “scary” friend to approach while you’re holding the dog’s leash. As they approach, watch your dog closely for signs of discomfort. They might change from panting to holding their breath with a closed mouth, turn their head or gaze away from the person, or start to back up, among other things. At the very first sign of discomfort, ask your friend to stop walking. Quietly and calmly wait for your dog to offer a more appropriate, social behavior. At first, your dog may continue to do the same thing they did initially (hold their breath, turn their head away, etc.), but will eventually realize that those behaviors *don’t work* anymore to get the scary thing to go away. Then they will begin to offer other behaviors.

If they offer anything that *approximates* or is the beginning step of a social, friendly behavior, tell your friend to turn and walk away. In the beginning, you might accept behaviors as small as exhaling (if your dog had been holding their breath), turning their head or even their eyes to look at the scary person (if they had been turning away or averting their gaze), or shifting their body weight forward just a tiny bit. As your dog progresses, you can start to wait for more exaggerated behaviors like stepping forward, reaching their nose out to sniff toward the scary person, or wagging their tail. Each time your dog exhibits a social, appropriate behavior, the scary person should walk away. If possible, they should walk out of sight, and remain out of sight for about 10 seconds before starting the next trial.

Important things to consider:

- When the scary person approaches, ask them to stop **before** your dog goes over threshold - before they are so scared that they try to hide, growl, bark, move forward, etc. Aim to capture the moment just as their body language shifts from comfortable to uncomfortable. This is why it is so important to be familiar with your dog’s body language before you start to train!
- Ask the scary person to be as natural as possible. We have a tendency to want to stand very still and quietly when working with a scared dog so we don’t do anything to upset them. That is not what your dog will encounter in the “real world”, so that is not how we should behave during training. Your helper should be as loose and natural as possible, moving around a bit, talking casually to you or to your dog, etc. – basically just acting as “normal” as possible.
- Avoid making eye contact, touching, or talking to your dog while you’re waiting for the shift from less comfortable to more comfortable. Any interaction from you might accidentally reinforce the fearful behavior we are working to change. You can, however, talk to and pet your dog *while the scary things is moving away*. The distance will be the primary reinforcer, but you can also use that time to tell them quietly what a good job they’re doing.
- Don’t tell the scary person to walk away for the same behavior more than three times in a row to avoid getting stuck at the same level without progression. After the third time offering the same behavior, wait for something different, or something *more social* or forward in motion.
- If you find yourself waiting for longer than 30 seconds to be able to tell the scary person to walk away, lower your criteria. It’s unlikely for a dog who is completely frozen to all of the sudden stand up and approach a stranger. We have to break that goal behavior down into many tiny little achievable steps. The first step can be as small as a flick of the ear or letting out a short breath. Take what you can get until your dog begins to offer bigger, more exaggerated behaviors.
- Keep training sessions short! 5-10 minutes is plenty of time for your dog to make progress. It’s important to stop while you’re ahead! If you have a couple of really great trials in a row, that’s a great place to stop. Try to avoid stopping on a mistake – but listen when your dog needs a break.

Caring for a Fearful Dog

Other applications: This procedure can also be effective if you and your dog are moving away from a stationary “scary thing”, like a garbage can or a fire hydrant. Think about ways you can apply these general rules in your everyday interactions with your dog. You don’t always have to set up a specific training scenario to practice. Alternatively, you can use the protocol if you are walking with your dog and notice them startling at a bag blowing in the wind, or if you carry a bag into a room where your dog is and that makes them cower or tuck their tail. Just remember the general rules: stop, quietly/ neutrally wait for a more appropriate/relaxed/social behavior, then provide your dog distance from the scary thing.

General training philosophy: The philosophy that we hope all of our adopters will adopt for their new dog is one based on a strong bond and clear communication between you and your dog. The general idea is that you will arrange your dog’s environment in a way that will make them most likely to succeed. For example, if your dog is afraid of the vacuum cleaner, maybe use it while they are out on a walk. If they’re afraid to go down the front steps, exit through the back door instead. Avoid putting your dog in situations that will elicit a fearful response until you’re both ready to train through it. When training, your dog should never be so afraid that they’re not able to behave normally.

Good, desirable behavior should *always* be reinforced, even if the behavior is as simple as standing quietly and looking up at you and the reinforcement is as simple as making eye contact with a smile and telling him they’re good. You should never assume that they know they’ve done the right thing, make sure you tell them every time. Likewise, you should never assume that they know what the right thing to do is – they won’t know unless you teach them. When undesirable behavior happens, your response should be to ignore (if it’s safe to do so), or to neutrally end the interaction.

Even if you’re really frustrated, avoid yelling at or physically manipulating your dog in any way. The last thing you want to do is anything that will make your dog afraid of you – that will make training really difficult moving forward. If your dog is showing fearful behavior that is unmanageable, quickly but neutrally remove them from the situation. Make a mental note that something in the environment was too hard, and think about how you can set it up better next time so your dog will be more likely to succeed.

If you observe your dog exhibiting behavior or body language that is shut down or unresponsive as pictured here, contact the MSPCA behavior team for guidance.



Body Language References

eileenanddogs.com/2013/11/21/shut-down-dogs-part-2/
<https://paws4udogs.wordpress.com/2013/08/12/belly-rub-redux/>
 Illustrations ©2016 Lili Chin