



Module 15: Dog Fears, Phobias and Aggression

- Definition of fear and anxiety
- The causes of fear
- The onset of fears and phobias
- Ten most common fears

In Module 15 we will look at dog fears, phobias and aggression, by exploring the following topics:

- Definition of fear and anxiety
- The causes of fear
- The onset of fears and phobias
- Ten most common fears
- Explaining aggression

Dog Fears, Phobias and Aggression - 5m28s

15.1 Introduction



The Merck Manual states that: "fear is a normal response to an actual or perceived threat or situation".

Anxiety is the typical response to agitation or fear when an animal feels there is a threatening situation.

Phobias are an exaggeration of the normal fear response, meaning it becomes overwhelming for your dog to handle the fear.

Aggression is just one of the responses your dog may have to their fear or phobia.

There are others, such as panting, salivation, lowered ears, tucked tail, low body posture, gazing away, vocalisation, piloerection, or displacement behaviour; such as lip licking or yawning. Some dogs will avoid or escape the stimulus causing the fear, which leads to a negative reinforcement. The dog has escaped the fear; therefore, they have been rewarded for running away, avoiding it or being aggressive.

15.2 The Causes of Fear

Vets and researchers believe the causes of fear and phobia in dogs are based on genetics, a lack of proper socialisation, or negative experiences.

It will be a response from some stimulus or stimuli in their life. A human's behaviour can create a fear response in a dog. For example, dogs that have been abused will usually cower and tuck their tail in when any human approaches. The dog has been taught to fear humans even though not all humans are alike.

Socialisation, with both humans and other animals, is important to make sure the dog does not develop anxieties associated with coming into contact with other humans or other animals.

If there is a socialisation problem you will see low walking behaviour, avoidance of new people and sometimes vocalisation. The new entity the dog is meeting causes fear because it does not happen often enough.

Your dog may be prone to certain fears or phobias due to their breeding. Certain dog breeds are prone to "profound fear" and withdrawal without a cause. These breeds include Siberian husky, Chesapeake Bay retriever, German shorthaired pointer, Bernese mountain dog, Great Pyrenees, Standard poodle, and Border collie. It has been suggested that there is a genetic influence that creates the fear responses in these dog breeds.

FACT



On average every 30 seconds someone in England and Wales dials the RSPCA's 24-hour cruelty line - for help

Source: rspca.org.uk

15.3 The Onset of Fears and Phobias

Research suggests most fears, anxieties and phobias develop in dogs between 12 to 36 months old.

Profound fear or withdrawal without a cause typically presents at the age of 8 to 10 months. However, there is also old-age-onset in dogs, such as separation anxiety, that may form due to a change in routine or a decline in memory, thinking and learning in the older dog.

15.4 Ten Most Common Fears

There are ten fears most researchers and vets see in dogs. Each will be examined below.

Fear of Thunder

Humans have labelled the fear of thunder "astraphobia". This same phobia can appear in dogs. The degree of the fear is different for each dog. For many dogs it is a mild fear due to the loud noise thunder makes. It can cause your dog to tremble slightly or flatten their ears and tuck their tail. A

dog with a more severe case of astraphobia may hide, lose bowel control or become destructive. Your dog's senses are heightened and often they are able to sense when a thunderstorm is about to happen, which is why your dog can start exhibiting fear before the storm starts.

Fear of Being Left Alone

Separation anxiety is a common fear among dogs used to being with a group of people or other animals. It can also develop from an early age when your dog feels it needs more companionship than it is given.

Separation anxiety is usually displayed by destructive behaviour the minute the owner leaves. It can also result in excessive barking and accidents around the home.

One of the best ways to help your dog if they do have separation anxiety is to desensitise them over a period of time:

When you are home place your dog in another area for short intervals. This allows your dog to get used to being alone, even when you are there, so they realise there is nothing to fear. You still need to give them plenty of attention, but they also need alone time to combat their fears. For example, you might go outside, but leave your dog inside for 10 minutes.

Fear of Fireworks

This fear is nearly the same as being afraid of thunderstorms. Fireworks are loud and highly unpredictable sounds to your dog. Your dog will display fear by trembling, hiding or tucking their tail. If you live in a place that often has fireworks then your dog can become accustomed to the noise. However, if fireworks only happen once or twice a year, you may need to use other means to desensitise your dog to the noise.

Fear of Veterinarians

For some humans going to a doctor can be a fearful experience.

Your dog could similarly fear the vet for several reasons. The smells, being handled by a stranger, being restrained or getting shots can all cause fear in your dog. There are plenty of fears associated with going to the vet. For example, if your dog is not used to the car it could be the ride that it is fearful of.

If your dog is not well socialised then the sudden introduction of other pets and people can induce fear.

You can manage this fear by taking your dog in the car more often, socialising your dog more, and taking your dog to the vet for a social occasion only rather than an examination. Your dog will learn that they do not need to fear the place where they receive love and affection - rather than injections with every visit.

Fear of Riding in Vehicles

Most dogs you see in cars have their tongues hanging out, their heads out the window, or their

bottoms firmly planted on their owner's lap, with one thing in common: they are happy to be in the car.

However, not all dogs have this same feeling.

Some dogs are afraid of being in a moving vehicle. It is often due to the exposure they have had to 'the beast' called an automobile.

A lack of early exposure to vehicles or any negative experiences inside one can bring about fear. For example, if your dog gets car sick they will dislike riding in one. You may not know they are feeling unwell, unless they actually get sick, which is rare.

If the first time your dog travelled in the car was to be left at a shelter or visit the vet then they may develop a fear based on negative experiences. You can help your dog by praising them or giving them a treat.

Take small steps.

First you give them a treat for getting in the car. Next, you provide a treat when the car is idling. You can then give a treat for short rides and work up to the longer rides.

Fear of Men

Dogs do not have to be abused to be afraid of men.

It can certainly result from abuse given out by a man; however, there can be other causes of this fear.

Often it is a lack of socialisation with men that will cause this fear.

It can also be a fear of the overall height difference. Animals are known to be afraid of other animals that stand tall over them.

The best way to desensitise your dog to their fear is by letting men approach your dog in a nonthreatening manner over a period of time. Your dog may growl, try to bite, or snap due to their fear, so the desensitisation should occur in controlled conditions. Any person should keep back but show they are not a threat. The best way to approach a dog is to let the dog come to you and smell you first, before you approach further.

Fear of Stairs

It may seem odd to us for a dog to have a fear of going up or down a set of stairs, but it is possible.

Your dog may stop the minute they see stairs. Most research suggests the fear arises from lack of socialisation or exposure to new things. If your dog has never seen a set of stairs it is likely they are going to be worried about what they are and how to use them.

You might be able to let your dog sniff the stairs and take their first steps or you may need to try making a game out of going up and down the stairs. Some dogs learn best by navigating stairs by going step by step.

Fear of Children

Children are small humans but there are several reasons to be fearful of them as a dog.

First, any dog that is being exposed to children later in life has not been used to their behaviours, such as pulling, touching and accidentally hurting your dog. It means your dog has not been socialised around children, so while your child has good intentions they can appear more like a threat than someone offering affection or kindness.

A puppy brought into a home along with your baby or when your child is a little older will do better than an older dog you have had for years. Your puppy is being socialised with the children, so they are apt to be more adventurous and tolerate the affection your children show.

You may need to seek a dog trainer or behaviourist if your dog does not respond well to children.

Fear of Strangers

As with the introduction of children into a household, the introduction of new people can also cause fear in your dog.

A fear of strangers is a lot like the fear of men, but in this case it is anyone who might approach your dog. You do not want your dog to accept every person they meet since someone could be a threat; however, you also do not want your dog showing aggression to every person they meet.

The best way to correct this behaviour is to let your dog approach new people in his or her own time. You should not force your dog to meet someone new as this can lead to aggression.

Fear of Objects

Your dog can develop fear of certain objects like vacuum cleaners, children's toys and holiday decorations.

Often, the one thing these objects have in common is sound.

The sound is loud and perceived as a threat. In these instances it is understandable for your dog to fear the objects. Not all fear of objects is as reasonable. Sometimes your dog might refuse to walk past something like a statue, apartment building or other object. The dog may tremble or make a mess when their fear overtakes them.

To make certain your dog can get over this object fear you can help your dog approach the object. Let your dog make the approach in its own time. In the case of the vacuum cleaner, approach your dog slowly, let him sniff it while it is on and show your dog that it is not going to harm him.

15.5 Aggression

Of the ten most common fears you learn that the effect of a phobia may appear as

aggression.

Fear Aggression in dogs can be triggered when they feel threatened. Why do dogs feel threatened and what can cause fear aggression in dogs? They may have experienced trauma in the form of emotional or physical abuse or neglect and this may affect their way of acting out. In such cases, especially if you have adopted a rescued dog from a shelter, you need to win his trust over time. What may seem like fun and games to you may feel threatening to the dog. While dogs are smart, their perception about people or situations does not always match with ours.

However, not all aggression is related to fear. Some breeds may be more prone to aggression due to genetic causes - although experts dispute this.

Aggression can be motivated by conflict, genetics, anxiety, fear, and learned responses to certain stimuli.

A fearful dog may be afraid of people, objects, children or other dogs and may respond aggressively. The best way to prevent fear aggression is to socialise your pet from early days. It also helps to condition his behaviour using counter-reflexes to resolve his fears.

Aggression in dogs accounts for 70% of the caseload in behaviour problems, with about five million people going to the hospital each year due to dog bites.

Aggression is displayed with threatening behaviour and harmful attacks, especially if your dog is unable to increase the distance between them and the threatening object. Posture and facial expression changes when aggression appears, and there is usually vocalisation before a bite occurs.

Any training needs to help the dog feel less threatened by the source of stress. Remember that dogs cannot reason away their fears like we can. You can use positive reinforcement, talk to him calmly when he feels stressed and gently increase exposure to fear stimuli.

Summary

Fear is a response to a stimulus that is perceived as threatening.

There are ten very common fears, but the list did not include some uncommon fears that may present in your dog.

You read of ways to help your dog work past their fear. A part of the fear your dog experiences can be related to your interactions with them, as well as the introduction of new objects or sounds.

In order to avoid issues with aggressive behaviour due to fear or other motivations, you have to take an active part in understanding your dog's behaviour, their fears, and work on correcting these issues.

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