

Behavior FAQ: Fear of People, Places and Noises

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If your dog has snapped at or bitten someone, seek help from a qualified behavior consultant immediately, preferably a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist. Speak first with your veterinarian so potential medical problems for aggression can be evaluated.

Dogs can be frightened or phobic of people, places, noises and objects. Common noise phobias are to thunder, fireworks, hot air balloons, trash trucks or construction equipment. We've also seen dogs that are afraid of outside air conditioning compressors and various indoor appliances, including the beeps from microwaves and smoke alarms.

If your dog is afraid of people, the most common reason is lack of socialization. Poorly socialized dogs didn't have the opportunity to have pleasant experiences with all different types of people during puppyhood. A lack of socialization can contribute to noise phobias and generalized fears of anything new and different.

Your dog needn't have had a traumatic experience with something to fear it. Just because your dog is afraid of certain people, don't jump to the conclusion that he was abused before you got him. Poor socialization is more likely the cause. Dogs seem more likely to be afraid of men than women, for reasons not entirely understood. In general, men appear more intimidating because they are physically larger, speak in deeper voices and are usually less delicate or gentle in their movements compared with women.

Most dogs that are afraid of people can learn to be friendlier, but some may never be social butterflies at ease with everyone. Some fearful dogs are also defensive, meaning they are threatening or aggressive to familiar or unfamiliar people as well.

Some dogs are more prone to fearful behavior than others. Although fearful behaviors aren't inherited, a dog's genetic makeup can result in a tendency, or lower threshold, for fear-related problems.

Almost all fearful behavior problems require counterconditioning and desensitization techniques to resolve. A behavior consultant can help, once your veterinarian rules out health problems. These procedures expose your dog to softer, quieter or more tolerable versions of whatever she is afraid of while pairing these events with something overwhelmingly enjoyable for your dog. Usually, this is an irresistible tidbit or perhaps a toy your dog is fanatic about.

For noise phobias, such as fireworks or gunshots, the sounds are difficult to recreate with the necessary varying degrees of intensity. You may need to use a specially made audio CD of the specific sound. Not all dogs react to a recording in the same way they do the real noise, but in many cases, these recordings can be extremely helpful. A variety of additional CDs are available that emulate the sounds of crying babies, thunderstorms, automobiles and vacuums.

It's vital that the behavior modification techniques be used correctly and precisely, otherwise they either won't work or can make the problem worse.

FIND A BEHAVIOR CONSULTANT TO HELP

Many problems are easily corrected through modification training, particularly if problems are addressed early. Find an animal behavior consultant in your area through one of the following Web sites: [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#), [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#) or [Animal Behavior Society](#). Learn more by reading "Guidelines for Choosing a Trainer or Behavior Consultant."