



Canine Fearfulness and Anxiety

(adapted from Canine Fearfulness and Anxiety by HeadStart Pet Behavior Program, 1998 Rolan Tripp DVM)

What Is It?

Anxiety is a mild type of fear, and in people is defined as a concern about an imminent danger. In the context of pet behavior problems, we are talking about an unnecessary or unreasonable anxiety. The signs of fearfulness and anxiety include cowering, hiding, dilated pupils, drooling, withdrawal, and trembling.

What Causes It?

There are several types of anxiety recognized in pets:

- Separation Anxiety (Fear of permanent isolation)
- Food Anxiety (Fear of starvation)
- Exercise Anxiety (Insufficient exercise resulting in excess energy)
- Leadership Anxiety (Lack of a clear leader causing anxiety due to fear of pack death)
- Punishment Anxiety (Anxious that punishment could happen at any time for unknown reasons)
- Noise Anxiety (Fear of the unknown causing death)
- Social Anxiety (Lack of experience resulting in fear of unexpected attack)
- Neophobic Anxiety (Fear of new things)

Who Does it?

There are 3 basic factors that indicate the tendency toward anxiety and fear in a pet. The first is genetic predisposition. The second is early social experience during the pet's critical socialization period. The third is environmental experiences during the remainder of life.

When Does It Happen?

Usually there is some specific trigger that triggers the behavior. The way to isolate these is to ask yourself to predict it. If you can predict fearful situations, this is the key to treatment.

How Can I stop It?

- Do not soothe and reassure the anxious behavior— the pet may misinterpret that you are praising anxious/fearful behavior.
- Avoid saying 'It's okay,' or 'it's alright' to a pet displaying anxiety, again they will get the wrong idea.
- Do not punish or scold – this may cause the pet to be more fearful.
- When fearful, ignore or act 'jolly'. – As leader, demonstrate leadership by acting unconcerned.
- Do leadership exercises – A strong leader gives confidence.
- Praise calm, confident postures – Watch for exploration, relaxed muscles, and self grooming.
- Do gentling exercises – When the pet is already relaxed, run your hands all over the body and move the body limbs to build confidence. The desired goal is a completely relaxed pet in any situation.
- Counterconditioning – When a dog is acting fearful, reduce the stimulus (move away from it) until the pet can act relaxed, then give the SIT command and praise or play a fun game. After many repetitions the goal is to link the formerly fearful stimulus, with positive counter experience.
- Systematic desensitization – For difficult cases, it may be necessary to do the full therapy. Usually this is done with dogs, and distance is used to decrease the stimulus. Once the pet can be counterconditioned, the distance is systematically decreased to an owner acceptable distance.

Things to Do:

- Brush or pet your dog and praise for sitting still and being quiet.
- Use favorite treats or toys as reward for sit, shake hands, lay down and obeying other commands.

11222 NE Halsey
Portland, OR 97220
T 503.253.2142
F 503.255.5524



- Consider a DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) plug-in or collar. Produces calming scent for dogs. Put this near dog bed/kennel/crate. Available here, or at Family Pet Center.