

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Desensitizing Your Dog to Specific Noises, Other Dogs and Situations

If your dog is consistently anxious, nervous or fearful around new people, dogs or sounds, desensitizing techniques may be necessary to help him cope. As with many dogs, rescued dogs may have a history and a reason for being fearful; however, in many cases dogs are simply under-socialized. This is especially true for dogs that are rescued and re-homed; they can have different phobias and they need help learning to accept their new environment without fear.

New noises for a dog that has never been inside a home can be overwhelming. One of the more common stressors is the doorbell ringing. This new noise may cause fear and the dog barks consistently even after they see who is at the door. The noise of a vacuum cleaner, ceiling fan, or even a TV, can cause barking, shaking, drooling or pacing. These are all signs of stress and the cure is desensitizing him to the noises so he can relax and acclimate to his new home.

Desensitizing a dog to any noise or situation requires patience; exposing him slowly to the specific sound, dog or person and changing how he reacts is a slow process. It will take many sessions before you start to see less anxiety. Some trainers believe in "flooding", which creates a situation that the dog fears and forcing him to accept it: **WE DO NOT RECOMMEND THIS METHOD!** It is cruel and can cause even more anxiety and future behavioral problems; exposing him slowly and creating a safe and pleasant association is much more effective.

Types of noises and situations

Barking at the Doorbell or Knocking at the Door

Barking is a common reaction to anyone at the door, and you do want your dog to warn you when there is someone near your house. Dogs see barking as their job to warn you that someone is outside, and is in his territory. However, it is important to be aware if it is more than a warning, or if he is becoming anxious when he hears the doorbell, or a knock at the door. The anxiety needs to be addressed as soon as possible, as it can escalate into territorial aggression for some dogs.

There are many reasons why it is important to work on barking problems, including neighbor complaints, repeated anxiety for your dog, and the fact that barking is often a beginning indicator of territorial aggression.

Healthy barking is not excessive, it is a warning someone is in front of the house or walking by the house, etc. Dogs will bark; this is how they communicate. Most dogs feel it is their

job to warn their owners if there is possible danger. Therefore, we do not recommend you stop or punish your dog from barking.

Barking at the Doorbell Strategies

Strategy 1

Plan to have a neighbor, friend or family member ring the bell or knock on the door when you are prepared (have the dog on leash and treats ready).

Ask the person to ring the bell periodically for 30-60 seconds at a time while the person inside calmly leashes the dog, gives the dog a treat and then opens the door.

When he sees who it is, you can have the guest offer his/her hand, palm-side down, and let the dog come over and sniff their hand and give him a treat. Ask the participant to let the dog come to them, DO NOT force the dog to sniff.

If the dog is still afraid, DO NOT have the person try to pet or touch him. It may take awhile, by repeating the exercise, for the dog to become more comfortable. The idea is to change the reaction of the doorbell and visitor from a fearful one into a good experience. Be consistent and patient and you will eventually see him become more comfortable.

Strategy 2

The Door Bell Game:

Make these exercises fun, so he wants to participate!

1. Get ready, and have your dog on-leash and have treats ready in your pocket
2. First, have your dog with you near the door, ring the doorbell once and immediately give him a treat. It is okay for him to see you press the bell and start to associate the bell with a good thing, you and the treat.
3. Next, add a cue, such as "Ready?" to give him even more of a hint that you are about to start the game
4. Add a little distance: Step back away from the front door a few feet and step back another 2 feet and try 2 or 3 rings between treats. If he reacts, then move forward and start again.
5. Say, "Good Boy!" in an upbeat, happy voice, after each bell
6. If the dog is not responding, then come closer and back up to a previous level and start again.
7. Once he is responding positively to you and the doorbell, have others in the family, neighbors or friends, ring the doorbell and try the exercise. This is the best way to desensitize him for future situations.

Strategy 3

Click and Treat Method

Prepare for a few days by associating the sound of the clicker with a good thing, like treats. When you have the dog's attention, start to "click", then immediately give the dog a treat. Do this a few times a day for about 3 days. The clicker gives a consistent noise that he will recognize and after awhile the dog can be weaned off the clicker.

Have the clicker handy, next to the door so you can reach it when someone knocks or rings the doorbell.

Next, click and treat every time the doorbell rings. This can lessen the natural tendency to get anxious when strangers ring the bell.

Strategy 4

Redirecting

- Be prepared and have your dog on a leash; ask a family member or neighbor to assist in the exercise.
- As soon as the bell rings, call your dog to you and ask him to do something else, such as "sit", causing him to be distracted from the doorbell.
- Call him even over to you and if he barks, gently coax him over and give him a treat, and say, "good boy!"
- As you practice, have the treats in another room and call him into the room after the doorbell rings. Be consistent, with multiple repetitions he will hear the bell and run to you instead of rushing the door

Note: For many dogs this is not the most effective as the doorbell trumps anything else. Once he has been desensitized, you can use this method more effectively in the future.

Desensitization to the Vacuum Cleaner and Other Noises

Use the Click and Treat Method (see above strategy). Prepare for training a few days ahead to get the dog to understand the clicker.

It is important to introduce noises at a level that your dog does not react. If he reacts consistently to an event, break the process down into smaller increments. For instance, move a vacuum cleaner into the room, but do not turn it on. With the dog is in the room and close to the vacuum cleaner, click and treat. After a few days, turn it on for 3 seconds, then turn it off and click and treat and then praise and treat him for his bravery.

- Keep the vacuum cleaner out and when he looks at it, click and treat
- When he moves towards it, click and treat
- Start moving it slowly in the room (not towards him) and click and treat
- Turn it on for one second and click and treat without moving it
- When he is comfortable for a length of time, add movement while it is moving and continue the exercise (it is usually much more effective to work with two people and randomly turn it on and off in another room and reward him whenever it goes on and ignore him when it is turned off)

General Strategies

- As soon as your dog becomes acclimated to a specific noise, but before he barks, click and treat. The timing of the process is important, rewarding before he barks, tells the dog no barking is a good thing.

- Put him on leash so he is not able to rush the door, and make sure you can get him to come to you when you call. You can start training for reliable recall, which will aid in this process (see the Golden Training library at homewardboundgoldens.org for more information)
- As your dog becomes more accustomed to the noise, start saying “good boy, nice job” and then click and treat after a longer duration of the noise. This reinforces that the noise is not to be feared

The goal is to lessen the anxiety by redirecting and changing his response from hearing the noise and bark, to hearing the noise and be calm. Again, it will take awhile to alter his reaction, so patience is important.

Troubleshooting

- Click and treat BEFORE he barks
- If the noise instantly causes your dog to bark, try to lower the intensity of the noise or the duration and work up
- Have your dog on leash so he can't charge the door or the window
- Do setups where you are prepared to do training so you can do a lot of repetition and control the level of the noise
- Increase the intensity as you do more training, but watch his reaction and do not push too fast for a change

Even though it may seem like slow progress, you will get to your goal faster if your dog is calm each session. With consistent practice, your dog will eventually react less and less as he sees there is nothing to fear.

Desensitizing Dogs to Other Dogs

Typically, a dog reacts to another dog is due to a lack of socialization. If a dog was raised alone, and never encountered another dog, he may not know how to respond appropriately. Under socialization in one dog can cause scuffles because the dog did not learn early on that getting in another dog's space is not appreciated. For example, there can be a misunderstanding for how to approach, sniff, play and interact. As puppies play and grow up with a littermate or another dog in the home, he learns what is appropriate and has good manners.

In addition, if one dog is on a leash, while the other is not, issues can arise. Being on a leash puts one dog at a disadvantage and he then feels threatened by the constraint. This can cause anxiety, fear or aggression towards another dog. When dogs first meet, both should be on a leash so they are on equal footing. Making sure your dog stays socialized with people and other dogs is very important.

Action:

Take your dog for a walk in your neighborhood to expose him to other dogs and people. Walk your dog often so he is given the opportunity to meet other dogs in a safe environment. It is important to always remain calm and not tense your body. If each time another dog approaches and you become tense because you know how your dog will react, you will unconsciously tighten up on the leash, and your body language and scent will REINFORCE the anxiety.

Action:

The click and treat method can also be used while on a walk. When your dog sees another dog have him "sit" and then click for calm behavior. Do not correct him, only reward for good behavior. Your dog will eventually associate approaching another dog is a good thing.

Understanding dog language could be helpful to understand your dog's reactions (see Understanding Dog Language on the Homeward Bound website under the Golden Training Library for more information).

If your dog begins to freeze and focus on the approaching dog, turn into him and continue to click and treat and try to get his attention. Practice in places where he will encounter other dogs on leash. The more you reinforce the quiet behaviors, the sooner he will come to realize there is nothing to fear, there is no reason to challenge other dogs, and he can look to you for leadership.

If the dog freezes into position, do not pull hard on the leash to get him to move; instead, move into the dog's personal space and he should give you all his attention. Do this quickly before he has the chance to obsess over the other dog. Be proactive and keep his focus on you during the walk.

Note: Never yell or correct a dog for acting aggressively toward other dogs. Correcting aggression is tricky, it is much better to distract the dog, then reward for good behavior.

It may take weeks or months before you see any improvement, and even then your dog may never completely overcome his fear or anxiety. Your dog does not have to like every dog or everybody. If he wants to be everyone's best friend that is wonderful, but if he does not, then that is okay too.

The purpose of desensitization is not to turn your dog into the life of the party, but to help him to relax in the presence of strangers, strange noises and other dogs. Most importantly, by helping him overcome his shyness, his world should be a much happier and less stressful place.