



Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Dogs and the Fear of Men, People, Situations and Objects

Dogs can develop fear of any person, place or thing. Considering that the same thing happens in humans, this is not surprising. There can be many reasons a dog is or becomes fearful. For an older dog, it could be past abuse, lack of socialization as a puppy, or the dog has never been exposed to that particular person, sound, situation or object before now.

How do dogs exhibit fear?

One of the most common responses of the fearful dog is aggression. Other responses are more passive, including those of avoidance, hiding, running away, and thigmotaxic behavior (staying close to the wall).

Fearful dogs display their emotions by means of their facial expression and body postures, as well as exhibiting various involuntary responses, such as trembling, salivating, papillary dilatation, evacuation of bowels or bladder, and discharge of anal glands. Dogs that are frightened of people avert their eyes, lower their head, flatten their ears, tuck their body and tail (hunkering down to make themselves smaller), and may roll over to expose their underbelly and urinate. All this body language is intended to appease the would-be attacker by signaling a diminutive status.

What causes a dog to be fearful?

Proper socialization of a puppy is the best solution for preventing and eliminating most fears; including the fear of different types of people, situations and objects. A dog that is overly fearful of people may not have been exposed to people during the critical period of his development (between 3 and 12 weeks of age). If during this time a dog is raised without human contact, he may never be entirely comfortable in the presence of unfamiliar people.

Unfortunately, there are truly harsh experiences, at the hands of cruel people, during the sensitive period and this is worse than plain under-socialization. Such heinous experiences lead to the more specific fears; such as, fear of men with white beards, tall hats, etc. Men and children, it seems, are most likely to behave inappropriately towards dogs during this sensitive period of development.

The more common reason is that the dog was never exposed to the person, object or situation, so they are fearful.

Common Fears

Working with adult rescued dogs, we see dogs that exhibit fear in a wide range of behaviors; they show behaviors such as submissive tendencies all the way to aggression. Listed below are the most common fears:

- **People** - Some dogs seem naturally fearful of people. It can be due to a lack of socialization, had never been exposed to specific kinds of people and situations, it could be a medical reason, or it could be from past abuse.
- Dogs that show nervousness around the family may have hormonal disturbances, such as sub-clinical hypothyroidism (a condition in which the thyroid gland is under producing the hormone, thyroxine) but for many the true cause of their genetic fearfulness remains unknown. Check with your vet to rule out any medical reason.
- When a dog reacts fearfully to a man, people tend to jump to the conclusion that a man has abused the dog in the past. It could be the case, but often it is a problem of lack of early social experience with men.

In addition, men, women, children, people wearing big hats, people in sunglasses, etc. could be the cause for the fear reaction. Assuming your dog does not like men in hats, have a man friend (with the treats) enter the room wearing a hat. If your dog appears fearful, have the man turn sideways and look up or away. This is a very non-threatening pose. Have your friend throw a few treats at a distance. Slowly decrease the distance as the dog becomes more confident and less fearful. Be calm.

Do not let people force themselves on a fearful dog. In spite of hurt feelings on the part of the offended human, this process needs to be taken just as slowly as when dealing with any other fear.

- **Vacuum Cleaners and other Household Appliances**

Vacuum cleaners make weird noises. Their use involves a person thrusting the thing around the room in gestures that would not make any sense to a dog.

Adding treats to vacuuming time can work through this fear. If the dog becomes afraid with the noise start with setting up the vacuum cleaner first, and then give the dog treats in the next room. Over several sessions, you can move the treat-giving closer, never faster than the dog's comfort level can handle.

Try this with the vacuum off, next with the vacuum cleaner still on and finally with the vacuum cleaner moving. While going through this program, put the dog in a different place whenever you vacuum so you do not scare the dog all over again.

The dishwasher would be a case for teaching the dog to calmly remain in the room but back from danger. Reward the dog for keeping his head OUT of the dishwasher!

- **Lawnmower**

Like the fear of vacuum cleaners, some dogs are afraid of lawnmowers as well. This seems to be less common, probably because we use lawnmowers in the open air, not in enclosed spaces where dogs feel trapped and the noise reverberates off the walls like the vacuum cleaner. There are dogs who run from lawn mowers, though, and even worse, dogs who will try to "attack" a lawnmower.

Running lawnmowers are extremely dangerous to dogs. Always remove your dog from the yard being mowed and keep the dog in a safe place until the lawnmower is turned off.

- **Slippery Floors**

Fear of walking on vinyl or other smooth floors is common. The dog may slip from tensing up and trying to hold tight to the floor with his toenails. Sometimes the events that trigger these fears are invisible to the human eye.

For example, a puppy slips and hits her chin on the floor, hard. Other parts of the body can take similar licks when feet slip. Dogs seem to have trouble at times managing all four feet at once. Unless they develop the skill for some reason-such as special training or games-they may find it awkward to walk backwards or to get their feet under control when one or more feet slip.

For dogs with orthopedic problems including hip dysplasia, walking on smooth floors can be painful. Make physical changes to aid these dogs. You can put rubber-backed rugs across the floor as a pathway for the dog. If the slick floor is not at your home but rather is some place you are visiting, you could either carry the dog or transport the dog across that floor on wheels.

If you know the fear is not due to a physical problem, use mealtimes to work through it. Mealtimes are opportunities to work on fears of slick floors. Place the dish in a spot relative to the smooth floor where the dog seems comfortable. Meal by meal, gradually move the dish further and further into the room with the smooth floor.

In situations where a dog walking on a smooth floor is unavoidable, look at possibilities for making the feet grip better or making the floor less slick. For example, if the floor is cleaned with a product that makes the floor more slippery you may want to consider another cleaner.

Some dogs react fearfully to something that looks strange. Others are more reactive to things that sound strange. Sensitivities from one dog to another are largely rooted in the huge differences in how different dogs actually perceive the world.

How to Help Your Dog Overcome His Fear

Once a dog begins to react with fear, correcting the original trigger of the behavior is not always enough to change the dog's habit and his reaction. The earlier you intervene, the better your chances of relieving the fear. Recovery is faster when you start rehabilitating the fear as soon as possible. In fact, if you work through it immediately after the scary event happens, you may be able to alleviate the fear in just one session. In such a case, you are dealing with a first impression rather than an established fear.

It may take some time and patience, so be prepared to continue helping the dog at a pace that is comfortable for him, it may take awhile.

Steps to identifying and resolving the fear

First, have a veterinarian examine the dog. Explain the issues and ask them to perform any indicated tests to diagnose problems that could be causing pain, sickness or disability. Work with the veterinarian to treat the problem and ease the dog's physical pain. Bring the dog back to the veterinarian on a regular basis.

Dogs have a survival instinct to hide their pain, because an animal showing weakness in the wild may not survive. Look for possible physical problems, rather than expecting the dog to cry out in pain or otherwise "tell you."

1. Assess the problem:

- Do you know of an event that started the fear?
- Is the thing the dog fears actually dangerous and/or likely to cause pain to the dog? How are you going to keep your dog safe?
- Ask yourself, are people or other animals in danger by the dog's behavior, and if so, how are you going to put a stop to that danger right now?

- How can you protect the dog from experiencing this fear while you work through the behavior modification steps?
- Is it necessary for the dog to cope with this situation, or could it be managed by simply keeping the dog away from it from now on?
- If you determine it is better to protect your dog from this situation rather than trying to treat the fear, then give the dog time to get used to your new plan. Chances are you will be surprised to see how much happier your dog becomes.

2. To treat his fear:

- First identify the fear, then **plan** the steps for “conditioning” your dog to resolve the fear. Conditioning your dog means to help him get over or just live with the fear by introducing or re-creating the fear slowly and show the dog there is nothing to fear.
- First, start at a **DISTANCE** at a low **INTENSITY** for a short time period; watch to see where the dog’s threshold is and at what point does he feel safe, start there.
- Next, plan how you will, over time, gradually reduce the distance, increase the intensity, and expose the dog to his fear for periods of longer duration.
- Plan how you will increase one variable at a time. Do this very slowly! Remember to praise in a happy, upbeat tone of voice.

3. Determine what things this dog finds rewarding:

- You will need a great incentive: What is your dog’s most favorite treat? Is it a piece of steak, chicken, cheese, hot dog? With the special treat, use an up beat, happy tone of voice. This tells your dog, it is ok and it is a good thing!
- If food does not work, you can use another privilege; such as, a walk or ride in the car, a toy, or anything else your dog likes.
- For some dogs, the fear trumps any favorite food, toy or activity. If this is the case, you will have to move slower, be more patient and make the goals smaller. Go back and re-start your conditioning program at the distance, intensity and duration where your dog happily accepts rewards (threshold).
- Advance very slowly toward your goal of having the dog comfortable with the feared thing so that the dog will be able to function happily around it in the future. Be patient and take as long as needed to avoid pushing the dog too fast.

4. Reward your dog at times the dog is showing confidence.

- Avoid rewarding fearfulness and do not punish the dog for acting fearful!
- Try to give the rewards within 3 seconds of seeing your dog in a calm state of mind that is your goal.

Specifically for the fear of people or men

A dog with a mild fear of men is usually easy to win over. Here are a few things you can do to ease the anxiety of your fearful dog:

1. **Do not force your dog beyond his comfort zone.** If there are men in your household or men who frequently visit, do not force your dog to accept their attention. This can lead to strengthening your dog’s fear at best, and a bite for you or the man preventing him from escaping his fear at worst.
2. **Allow your dog to approach men on his own.** It may be hard for the male dog lovers in the household, but the best thing they can do is ignore the fearful dog. Trying to make friends with the dog may have the opposite effect than what is hoped for, simply intensifying the dog’s fear. Allow your dog to decide how close he wants to get to the man.

3. **Use treats to encourage your dog.** Men should keep some treats handy while they are around the dog. Any time the fearful dog gets even a little closer than usual; they can very gently toss some treats in the dog's direction. It may take awhile before the dog accepts the treats, but eventually you may train your dog that good things happen whenever he approaches a man. With some time and patience, the fearful dog will be ready to accept the companionship of the men in the household.

Do Not Push or Scold The Dog

Careful - do not push your dog. If you are afraid of snakes, you do not want one in your lap right away. If you push, someone may get bitten. Most dog bites are fear related. The dog may also become more fearful and react negatively more quickly next time.

Do not reprimand, scold or tell your dog, "No". Your dog believes their fear is rational and a "No" is only reinforcing their belief. To a dog, the "No" translates to, "No, do not go near that scary person", not "No, don't growl at that perfectly nice person with the hat."

Your energy can affect your dog!

Your dog is very aware of your emotions; if you are worried that your dog will be afraid, both of you are fearful and your dog instinctively knows this. Your dog will assume you fear the same man with the hat; not just worried about them. So be confident, keep your voice calm and add some laughter. Be relaxed and calm; do not worry. Tell your dog everything is fine with confidence.

Keep the Focus

If you encounter someone or something fearful on a walk, do not focus on the feared person or object. Turn your back on the feared object and keep your dog's focus. Turning your back tells your dog, you have no fear. Talk to your dog, give it a treat and ignore the object. One trick is to put a treat in your hand and let your dog see it or smell it. Take a few moments before you release the treat. Keep your dog's attention.

Summary

Chances are good that at some point with every dog you' will have the opportunity help the dog overcome a fear. Some dogs go through most of their lives with barely an apprehensive moment, and then get hit hard in old age when their bodies begin to fail and they do not know how to cope. Now you know how to help your dog develop the ability to cope, at any age.

Sources

Kathy Diamond Davis
Humane Society, Mendocino