

# Empowering anxious, shy and fearful dogs

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## Like people, canine personalities come in all shapes and sizes



There are the extroverts, the reserved and the truly inhibited. The latter is my focus for this blog post. In most cases, fearful dogs who seem unwilling to perform certain behaviours, do so because they lack the ability. If a dog does not experience socialization, novelty and new things as a puppy, it will have a harder time in adulthood to learn new skills.

A dog can also suffer from a past trauma for many years. In addition, some dogs out there simply have a genetic predisposition to be wary and easily startled. Expecting a timid dog to behave like a confident dog, is unrealistic. Training needs to be modified to alter their world view. As pet parents, we have to tailor our approach to suit their unique needs.

## Let's take a look at three aspects of the canine emotional landscape to understand our shrinking violets a little better

**Fear** is an emotional response that happens when an animal feels they are in danger.

**Anxiety** is the anticipation of future danger, whether it's real or not.

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**Stress** is mental or emotional strain resulting from tense circumstances. It can happen as a result of a single event or it can develop over a period of time when a dog is subject to several continual background stressors.

## **All change is rooted in creating an environment where a dog feels safe**

Tell visitors to ignore your fearful companion. Let the dog initiate any social interaction. Know your dog's triggers and the threshold for tolerance. [Train to gain your dog's attention](#). Show your dog that great things follow when they pay attention to you.

## **The name of the game is to create positive associations**

When it comes to anxiety it's not about altering how a dog behaves in a certain situation. It's all about changing how they feel about that situation. It's about finding ways to develop their confidence, the behaviour will then change on its own.

Take the pressure off a dog that is fearful of new people. If the dog is new to your household and not ready to be social yet, avoid looking or talking to him. Feed meals by tossing bits of food to her, from a short distance. Move around, generally away from the dog and make sure the food is yummy enough to compel them to take a chance and move out to obtain it.

Desensitization is one very useful strategy. It works by exposing the dog to low threshold amounts of an uncomfortable situation and pairing with a high-value food reward, thus creating a positive association. Over time as the dog gains confidence, the food reward can be faded out.

## **Help your dog to avoid trigger stacking**

Trigger stacking is an emotional response that happens when a dog is exposed to a single stressor he can't get away from or when he's exposed to continual low level, background stressors which eventually lead him to suddenly act out. Trigger stacking causes the buildup of Cortisol in a dog's blood which is a stress hormone playing a key role in [aggression](#). Cortisol lasts at least two days in a dog's system after a stressful event so if the dog is under continual levels of stress, even at low levels, it will be more prone to aggression.

### **For Example:**

One new person petting a dog may be uncomfortable but tolerated by him. A second person attempting to pet him may cause him to react.

## **Getting dogs to move differently helps them to think differently**

In order for dogs to change existing behaviour, they need to be able to learn new behaviours.

Most dogs want to learn what you want them to do. Show your dog what you want them to do, rather than just attempting to stop the behaviour you don't like.

Nerves in our bodies control movement so if we change the way we move, we can change the way we think. Exercise addresses movement especially, after a stressful event, and lowers stress both in humans and dogs.

Check out some training classes for your shy companion. If she's not yet ready for group instruction, try some private classes to build confidence at a pace more in keeping with her comfort level. Novelty is important to help a dog's brain continue to grow. Animal studies have shown that pleasant, new experiences activate the brain to release dopamine (a pleasure-inducing chemical that also helps the brain to process and learn new skills).

Learning actually changes the structure of the brain as new neurons and pathways between them are created. Owners of fearful or anxious dogs should find low threshold ways to provide novel experiences for their animals. Introduce new toys or items in your dog's environment. Move their food and water bowls occasionally. Make up new games, Try out a [puzzle toy](#) for instance. Routine and predictability are the bedrock of a stable dog but also be sure to add some variety into their lives, to improve their ability to learn and adapt.

## **Strategies for living with an anxious dog**

Don't make a big deal about a scary incident. Learn to put your game face on. If you drop your cup of tea on the floor, keep calm and cool or try laughing. What can it hurt? Laughing is not going to change the fact that you'll still need to mop up the mess but it may have a lowering effect on your blood pressure. Remember that your dog takes his cues from you and may perceive the experience with curiosity if you laugh, versus diving under the table if you shout and curse.

Don't punish your dog for fearful behaviour. When a dog learns that you both recognize and respect their need for space, they'll grow more trusting. If you punish fearful behaviour, they will stop giving you a warning and may just move straight on to biting the next time.

## **Behaviour medications**

For some dogs with chronic anxiety, the fear is unending. Research shows just how much this kind of stress affects their health. The use of medications alone will not "fix" your dog but it may allow him or

her to learn new skills, behaviours and confidence, which would otherwise be very difficult.

## Resources

If you feel your dog's situation warrants it, find a vet well versed in the use of behavioural medications.

If you want to do more research, a book called *Clinical Behavioural Medicine for Small Animals*, by Dr Karen Overall, is one of the top resources out there.

You might also check out *A Guide to Living with and training a fearful dog*, by Debbie Jacobs CPDT-KA, CAP.

And there is a lot of information on behavioural medications and supplements at American College of Veterinary Behaviorists [www.dacvb.org](http://www.dacvb.org)

**THE DOG BLOG** is a great resource for tips on training and canine well being. Got questions or a topic in mind? Let me know via the comments box. I would love to hear from you.

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