

Working with Fearful Dogs

By Karen Oliver

A dog can be fearful of people, other dogs, situations, being alone, things on the planet that move or make weird noises, or all of these things.

When raising puppies it is easier to control situations and introductions, making all of them as positive as possible. With older (and foster) dogs, time needs to be taken to change their mind and behavior about things that frighten them. It is important that your dog understands that you are his safety net and that he can trust you.

I work with the dogs when they are “under threshold” (meaning in a place before the fearful behavior is full blown) and in baby steps to keep them as comfortable, and able to learn, as possible. Once a dog is in reactive behavior mode learning is very difficult, if not impossible.

When the fear is something outside of the home I work at a distance from the fear-inducing item to start. For example, I will start training all the way across the park from the kids on skate boards. While the dog is calm I will use a “watch me” command and a “leave it” command and reward calm behavior with the dog’s choice of: quiet, confident petting, treats, a toy to hold or possibly, moving farther away. Know what reward your dog likes the best and responds to the best before starting training sessions. Work to make the distance smaller with continued calmness. This should be trained in baby steps, with the sessions being kept very short and positive. If the session goes badly and the dog cannot recover, stop the session, remember the best learning happens under threshold.



For fear of people I find a dog savvy volunteer to help me; someone who will listen to what I have to say and not push the dog harder than necessary. I do not test the dog out on strangers. I will have the person be at whatever distance is comfortable for the dog and have them ignore the dog and chat with me. They can drop treats toward the dog if he is receptive to them, or I can. As the dog’s comfort level grows we can do things like walk together or sit nearby. When the dog is more comfortable I will have the friend take the dog’s leash while we chat. Dogs often respond to the person on the other end of the leash as being the one in control. You may have to do this with several different people before the dog becomes less fearful of humans in general.

For fear of being alone, start with the dog being away from you in another room and build from there. I find that foster dogs can become very attached but learn to lessen that behavior with time and space. You can also leave the house for short periods. Keep the time away inconsistent; don’t just continue to lengthen the time. I tend to crate dogs when I am not home (for the safety of the dog and my home) after the dog has been crate trained for night time. This is NOT a cure for real separation anxiety. True separation anxiety needs much slower training steps.

These are some very broad and basic ideas to help you with a fearful dog. Training always needs to be appropriate to the dog’s level of fear and adaptability. As with all dog training, you need to have the time, the patience and the ability to recognize and reward baby steps.