

Behavior Tips: *Understanding and helping your fearful pet*

Pets can become scared for a wide variety of reasons, including **unfamiliar company in your home, loud noises such as thunder and fireworks, and more complex causes such as a history of experiencing verbal and/or physical abuse**. Some research studies suggest that there may be breed and individual differences with respect to prevalence of fears and phobias in pets and fearful behaviour is expressed. Some dogs and cats even have familial (genetic) fears, while others had deprived puppy- or kittenhoods that put them more at risk for fear. While more research in this area is warranted, this wide array of reasons for fear suggests that not all pets can be treated the exact same way for fear-induced behaviour and not all fears are the same. All pathological fear causes pets to suffer. However, there are many tips that you can use to understand, prevent, and reduce fear in your pet. Some of these include:

1. **Providing a safe, quiet space away from stimuli**
2. **Use of a calming prescription diet or anxiolytic medication**
3. **Behaviour modification**
4. **Protection**



Fearful, hiding behaviour (left) vs. relaxed (right) in a comfortable, protected space

1. Providing a safe, quiet space away from stimuli: Sometimes animals can quickly become overwhelmed when placed into a new, unfamiliar environment, so it is important for new owners to be able to provide them with an area in their home that their pet can quickly retreat to in moments of fear or overwhelming stress. Such areas could include a bed or crate for them to sleep in or hide in and should be located in a room of the house that is free from loud noises or other fear-inducing stimuli. You can encourage your dog or cat to use these areas by providing them with treats or other rewards when they go to these areas of their own accord after being placed under some form of stress. Lick mats, Kongs and other food toys can both help interest some dogs and cats and redirect their focus and let you know how scared they are. Truly fearful cats and dogs cannot eat. If you notice that something your pet craves is present and they ignore it – they are distressed. If you continue to present treats they love and they eat them – they are less distressed.

2. Calming diet & anxiolytic medication: There are now prescription diets (e.g. Royal Canin Calming Diet; Purina Neurocare) designed to affect how brains work and to help calm dogs. These can be used as at least a partial replacement for your pet's food. If your dog or cat is already eating a prescription diet, do not change this without talking to your veterinarian.

Chewable fluoxetine tablets (Reconcile) or clomipramine tablets (Clomicalm) are anti-anxiety medications that are licensed for use in dogs, and may also help some cats. These are just two of a long list of medications that your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviour specialist may consider to help your fearful dog or cat. The goal of behavioural medicine is not to sedate or drug your pet – it is to provide relief for distress. Sometimes, some degree of mild sleepiness or sedation is warranted so your veterinarian may prescribe a behavioural medication like trazodone for this. Tell your veterinarian if your pet is too sleepy or has lost her 'spark' – finding the right medication may take multiple tries.

3. Behaviour modification/desensitization: Sometimes your pet may be fearful of a stimulus that, despite your best efforts, is sometimes unavoidable. Oftentimes this includes fireworks, having to go outside for a walk and seeing new people or dogs, or having to travel. While these fear-inducing situations may not always be predictable, the situations themselves can be used in behavioural modification for your pet. When you find yourself or your pet being constantly exposed to these stimuli, it may prove beneficial to owners to try and find a way to desensitize them to these stimuli. Desensitization is the process of very gradual exposure at levels below that which triggers the fear. If you then reward the dog for attending to you and not the fearful circumstance, you are practicing counter-conditioning. Studies have shown that behavioural medications speed the rate at which dogs acquire learning from behaviour modification.

It's absolutely critical that fearful animals are never scared by your behaviour. Physical punishment, harsh words, yelling, and attempting forcing a dog or cat to do something will always, always make the dog or cat worse. Maladaptive and excessive fear is a behavioural pathology and it needs the same help any sickness of the body needs.

4. Protect: We do not all recover at the same speed. You may need to protect your dog or cat until you can learn how much they can recover on their own. There is nothing wrong with encouraging them to go to their safe space to avoid the fearful stimulus. Your dog doesn't need to come to the party and your cat doesn't need to visit with dogs to have a good life. Once you know what can and cannot happen, you can talk to your veterinarian about getting the right care. No one needs to live with fear.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca).

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