

Fear of New Places or Things

Why is my dog so afraid of new things?

From an evolutionary view, being afraid of novel things has advantages. If 2 individuals come across a man-eating tiger and one person runs away in fear while the other does not, which person will likely be the one to pass along their genes to the next generation?

Often it is difficult for people to grasp why something might be scary from a dog's perspective because we so often take these familiar everyday things for granted. To you it is a vacuum cleaner, but to the dog it is a noisy scary thing that moves and makes sounds that hurt his ears. To you, it is just the Veterinarian's office, but to your dog it is a brightly lit, enclosed space that stinks of dog stress-smells and disinfectants with a slippery floor and a person with a white uniform he doesn't know that does ouchy things to him!



Level 1: Create a Supportive Environment

How to do it.

Step 1. Chronic anxiety causes stress hormones to be constantly circulating in the bloodstream, having effects known to be harmful to both an animal's body and brain long-term. By taking away some anxiety and stress the animal feels in his home environment, it allows him to biologically relax and stop circulating those stress hormones part of the time, making him more resilient to fearful situations. Ways to reduce anxiety at home include;

- Creating predictability and routine. By having a regular schedule and feeding & walking your dog at the same time each day, he won't stress about when he will get fed or walked.
- Putting a "Nothing in Life is For Free" program into action. By asking your dog to sit before meals or going outside, you create predictability, set expectations, and reinforce the idea that he can get his needs met by earning them.
- Making sure your dog has a safe environment to retreat to if he needs where other people or dogs cannot harass him. This can be a crate or bed in a quiet spot in the house or a back bedroom. Make it clear to other family members that when your dog goes there he needs alone time.

Step 2. Make time for exercise and play every day. Both exercise and play help to counteract the effects of stress hormones and reduce anxiety symptoms.

Step 3. If there is something in your home that your dog is afraid of, help your dog to gradually get used to it being around. For instance, if your dog is afraid of *vacuum cleaners*, try the following plan:

- 1) Put your machine in the middle of the house where your dog can easily keep an eye on it and leave it there for several days, until he seems to no longer care that it is there.
- 2) Once your dog seems comfortable with the Vacuum in one spot, move it around to another spot in the house a few times a day until he gets used to it being moved around.
- 3) Begin leaving treats on or near the vacuum cleaner throughout the day for about a week so your dog will start looking forward to checking the vacuum for good things.
- 4) Fill a hollow rubber toy such as a Kong with peanut butter, treats or other food your dog enjoys and give it to him in an out-of-the-way space that he can retreat to when you are vacuuming. Then practice moving

the vacuum cleaner around the house as if you are vacuuming, but with the machine turned off while he works on his special toy. Repeat over several days until he seems to enjoy his vacuum cleaner toy time, or at least until he is okay with it.

- 5) With the vacuum cleaner in a different room from the dog, turn it on and leave it in running for a few minutes while you give your dog his stuffed toy. Repeat until your dog seems okay with the vacuum noise. **Note; if you can turn off the brush part of the vacuum you may want to do that to avoid ruining your carpet during training.*
- 6) Practice vacuuming in another room from your dog while he works on his stuffed toy. Gradually over time you can vacuum in areas closer to where your dog enjoys his toy but be careful not to get too close or surprise him.

In the future he may never be fully relaxed around the vacuum, but he will hopefully reach the point of tolerating it without panicking and hiding.

Level 2: Build Your Dog's Confidence

How to do it.

Step 1. *Get training!* When dogs learn that they can do things like sit or shake to earn treats, they are learning that they have the ability to solve problems and communicate. Successes, even small ones are a great confidence builder. Additionally, learning skills through specialty classes such as K-9 Nosework or Agility can also boost confidence and be fun to do.

Step 2. *Reward bravery.* Anytime you see your dog showing curious or brave behavior such as sniffing, approaching, or looking at something new or potentially scary, praise them for it and even feed them a treat for their courage. If being brave pays off, your dog will be more likely to do it more often and be less fearful less often.

Step 3. *Make new things less scary by pairing them with something your dog likes.* For example, if your dog is scared of riding in cars, you can give him his favorite treats to eat when you get in the car and take frequent trips to his favorite dog park so that getting in the car becomes a signal of good things to come.

Troubleshooting:

Never force your dog to "get over his fears" by pushing him into situations that scare him until he no longer reacts. It is much more likely that you will traumatize him rather than help him get over those fears.

So, if your dog is afraid of something, should you tell him "it's okay" and try to reassure him? Good question, and the answer is, like most things, it depends. Some dogs view the attention that they get when their owners are reassuring them as a reward for being afraid of something and think that what they are doing is the right thing, in which case it can do more harm than good. On the other hand, if your dog sees that you are not afraid of the thing he is scared of, and you approach it and touch it or something, he may feel braver as well and try to investigate. In the end it comes down to whether or not your reassurances increase his fearful or brave behaviors.

****The information presented here is for supportive and informative purposes only; it is not intended to diagnose treat or cure any behavioral issue and is not a substitute for professional help. With any behavior problem that persists or worsens, please seek help from a qualified behavior professional.***