



Support Animals
Save Lives
Spread Compassion

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? It is often 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 their ears. To you, it is 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 they don't know who does ouchy things to them!

Level 1: Create a Supportive Environment

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 their home environment, it allows them to biologically relax and stop circulating those stress hormones part of the time, making them 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, they won't stress about when they 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 they can get their needs met by earning them.
- Making sure your dog has a safe environment to retreat to where other people or dogs cannot harass them. 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 they need 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 they seem 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 they get used to it being moved around.
- 3) Begin leaving treats on or near the vacuum cleaner throughout the day for about a week. 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 them in an out-of-the-way space that they 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 they work on their special toy. Repeat over several days until they seem to enjoy their vacuum cleaner toy time, or at least until they are okay with it.
- 5) With the vacuum cleaner in a different room from the dog, turn it on and leave it running for a few minutes while you give your dog their 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 they work on their stuffed toy. Gradually over time you can vacuum in areas closer to where your dog enjoys their toy but be careful not to get too close or surprise them. In the future, they may never be fully relaxed around the vacuum, but they will hopefully reach the point of tolerating it without panicking and hiding.

Level 2: Build Your Dog's Confidence

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 and be less fearful.

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 them their favorite treats to eat when you get in the car and take frequent trips to their 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 their fears” by pushing them into situations that scare them until they no longer react. It is much more likely that you will traumatize them rather than help them 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, 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 they are afraid of, and you approach it and touch it or something, they may feel braver as well and try to investigate. In the end it comes down to whether or not your reassurances increase their 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.***