

Is your dog anxious or fearful?

A CLOSER LOOK AT STRESS, FEAR AND ANXIETY IN CANINES

The PDSA 2016 PAW report* – a survey of over 30,000 pet owners – stated that 90% of pet owners felt well informed about their dog's behavioural needs. However, the same survey also found that just 20% felt that their dog wasn't afraid of anything. What's going on with all these fearful pets? And how can we help them feel happier?



WHY DO DOGS FEEL FEARFUL?

Your dog might become anxious or fearful of specific triggers for a number of reasons, many of which are beyond your control.

This can include:

- ✓ Their genetic make-up
- ✓ Early life experiences
- ✓ Encounters with things in later life

Your dog will try different responses and change their behaviour depending on the consequences of what works and what doesn't. Sometimes, your dog's coping strategies result in behaviours that are problematic for their well-being – and distressing and difficult for you.

* <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/get-involved/our-current-campaigns/pdsa-animal-wellbeing-report>

SCIENTIFICALLY SPEAKING, HERE IS HOW THE FEAR RESPONSE DEVELOPS WHEN YOUR DOG ENCOUNTERS SOMETHING SCARY

FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH SOMETHING SCARY

Stress response is triggered

When your dog encounters something scary, they become 'aroused' or 'hyper-vigilant' and they think about what to do next.



Your dog tries to resolve the conflict

Your dog will try different responses to solve the issue – that might be running away, hiding or growling to make the scary thing go away. The response he or she tries will depend on their personality and past experiences.

Consequences?

If your dog's behaviour successfully removes the threat (your scared dog moves away from the threat, or the threat itself moves away or ceases), 'arousal' will decline, helping them feel better.

If the behaviour is unsuccessful, and the threat is not removed, your dog becomes more 'aroused'. They may try another response to the threat – if they started with a warning growl and the threat doesn't go away, they may snap.

NEXT ENCOUNTER WITH SOMETHING SCARY

If their response worked last time, they may try it again.

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However, if this behaviour doesn't successfully remove the threat again, they may try something else. Perhaps instead of barking, the dog will growl.

Consequences?

With repeated exposure to scary events, a successful behaviour (e.g. growling, hiding, barking or snapping) becomes more established (automatic).



AFTER MANY ENCOUNTERS



Over time, with repeated exposure to a scary situation, successful responses will become more established (hiding, growling or whatever has worked in the past). There are two ways this can manifest:

1: Sensitisation – responses occur even with less intense triggers. So if your dog has shown fearful responses towards other dogs coming close, they may start to react to dogs that used to be at a 'safe' distance.

2: Generalisation – they respond in a wider range of situations. For example, a dog who is scared of sudden, unpredictable loud noises – such as fireworks, thunder or heavy vehicles – may develop a reaction to other similar noises.

Emily Blackwell, 2016

HABITUATION AND SOCIALISATION

There's a sensitive time in puppy development between 3-12 weeks old, called the 'early socialisation period'. During this time, puppies are learning about the world around them, how it makes them feel, and how to respond to it.

As the building blocks for later life, it's important that puppies get to know the different things that they will encounter both in their new home and out and about as neutral – or better still, positive – rather than negative. And that's where what animal behaviourists call 'habituation' and 'socialisation' come in – find out more in our [Doggie Dictionary here](#).

WHAT HAPPENS WITHOUT HABITUATION AND SOCIALISATION?

Fear, anxiety and problematic behavioural responses can be the result of poor socialisation and habituation. But thankfully, there are ways to work with your dog to overcome fears and anxieties. Techniques called desensitisation and counter-conditioning (see the [Doggie Dictionary](#)) can be used as part of a behaviour therapy plan if something has already become scary or to prevent a problem from becoming more ingrained in its early stages.

WHAT MIGHT BE WORRYING YOUR DOG?

A surprisingly large proportion of dogs have not been fully socialised or habituated to the different situations, animals or people that they may encounter in adult life. Several common triggers of fear and anxiety include:

OTHER DOGS

At home, or out and about.



VISITS TO THE VETS, GROOMERS OR KENNELS

Negative past experiences can often be the root cause of anxiety in dogs.



LOUD NOISES

This can include things like fireworks, gunshots, sirens, bird scarers, vacuum cleaners, even music.



BEING LEFT ALONE

This is known as separation related behaviour (SRB), or 'separation anxiety.'



NEW SITUATIONS OR OBJECTS

This can include the terrifying cones that have invaded the street, next door's evil washing line, or a new sign outside a shop, or simply encountering situations or places they haven't experienced before.



TRAVELLING AND HOLIDAYS

Our dogs join us on more adventures than ever before, which can be daunting, and filled with new experiences. Some dogs also struggle with the travel itself – cars, trains, boats, planes, buses and more – which can be overwhelming for a dog.



PEOPLE

The postman, strangers, people passing by or visiting your home, or old friends who look or behave differently, or have a distinctive feature (think hats, beards, high vis jackets and glasses), or people running, cycling, skateboarding etc.



NEW MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY

Unfortunately, our best friends don't always feel comfortable with new arrivals, that's both new pets and new little people.



MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CANINE ANXIETY

Now you've got an idea of what's happening when your dog is feeling stressed or anxious, do you know how to spot the signs? The next article in our series – **'Secret signs of anxious dogs'** – takes a closer look at the body language and behaviour of fear and anxiety in dogs, as well as what you can do to help your dog feel calmer and teach them new, positive feelings and responses.