

Overview of Fear in Dogs

What it is, why it's important, and
what to do about it

January 26, 2015

Your Presenters

- Kim Yocklin, CPDT
 - Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT)¹
 - Pat Miller Certified Trainer
 - Canine Character, LLC (www.caninecharacter.com)

¹www.ccpdt.org

²<https://peaceablepaws.com/pat-miller-certified-trainers/>

What is Fear?

- Fear is a feeling of apprehension associated with the *presence or proximity* of an object, individual, or social situation¹
- Fear is a natural and normal response to perceived threats
 - Defense against danger is a key survival function
 - Appropriate in many situations
 - Can be debilitating to the inappropriately fearful dog
- Fear is not a choice
 - Circuitry in the brain that controls emotional responses is stronger than that in the cognitive area
 - This is why we don't have to think about jumping away from a moving snake

Why Are Some Dogs More Fearful Than Others?

- Genetic propensity
 - Predispositions to be fearful of people and perhaps other things such as thunderstorms can be inherited¹
- Lack of socialization
- One or more specific negative experiences
- It is not necessary to know precisely how or why a fear developed to manage or modify the behavior

Developmental Periods for Dogs & Cats

- ◆ Neonatal—eyes/ears closed; no fear response
- ◆ 3-12 weeks of age—Sensitive Period for Socialization
 - May startle easily but recover quickly and can easily learn that startling objects and people are safe
 - Early socialization helps animals assimilate & cope throughout the rest of their lives
 - Until 6-8 months, continued socialization is important (Yin)
- ◆ 12 weeks through remainder of lifetime
 - Default becomes fear of novel objects & environment

Sensitive period for socialization: *Time of development during which young animal is primed to form bonds & attachments and learn to accept objects, environments, and other animals as safe (Yin)*

Fears, Anxieties & Phobias...

Oh My!

These are closely related emotional responses, however they differ significantly in several ways¹:

- ◆ presence or absence of a physical trigger
- ◆ intensity of the dog's response
- ◆ ease with which the emotional response and related behaviors can be modified
- ◆ *Fear* is a feeling of apprehension associated with the *presence or proximity* of an object, individual, or social situation
- ◆ *Anxiety* is the distress or uneasiness of mind caused by apprehensive anticipation of future danger or misfortune, real or imagined
- ◆ *Phobias* are persistent, extreme, inappropriate fear or anxiety responses, far out of proportion to the level or nature of threat presented

Why Should We Recognize Fear?

- Quality of Life: pets with serious behavior disorders are suffering¹
- Fear & aggression are on a continuum
 - Fear is a significant cause of aggression in general, and the #1 cause of aggression in veterinary & shelter settings²
- Fearful experiences are cumulative (they add up!)
 - More fearful experiences → more fear → more fearful experiences; repetition helps “hardwire” this process
 - Dogs often generalize bad experiences in one situation (e.g. vet, groomer) to being fearful in the rest of life³

¹Dr. Tynes, DVM, DACVP & ACVP president

²Sophia Yin, DVM, MS

³Susan Barrett, DVM; the Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center

How Is Fear Recognized¹?

The Four “F”s:

- Flight
- Fidget
- Freeze
- Fight

¹Next four slides are based on Dr. Barrett’s inspiring presentation on the Importance and Application of Low Stress Handling in Companion Animal Practice; 25Jan2015 WVVMA Conference

Flight

Flight is often what we picture when we think about a fearful dog.

- Avoidance, fleeing, panic, escape, hiding
- Plus lots of other body language
 - ◆ Whale eye or avoidance of eye contact
 - ◆ Crouched/low body posture
 - ◆ Lip licking
 - ◆ Trembling
 - ◆ Whining
 - ◆ Tail low or tucked
- Usually won't eat (might eat treats tossed on the floor in his direction)

Fidget

Fidget is a less recognized manifestation of fear.

- Can include panting, pacing, rowdiness, jumping
- Can seem happy, like a gregarious lab
- Might appear as intense, rough play that is out of place (e.g. in an exam room at the vet's)
- Can't sit still or be restrained; may try to flail with restraint

Freeze

Freeze is more subtle, but also very important to recognize.

- Generally a crossroads to another “F”
- Often fleeting
- “Shut down” is most extreme version of freeze
 - ◆ These are the dogs that vets might say are
 - ◆ Similar to “learned helplessness,” which is linked to depression in humans
 - ◆ Might look benign to the casual onlooker, but is extraordinarily stressful

Fight

Fight happens when we aren't listening to the dog telling us he's stressed (e.g. via the other three "F"s), and now he needs to speak "louder."

- Aggression is often learned—we teach dogs to bite us by not listening when they tell us they are stressed or fearful, and not helping them deal with their stress or fear
- Fear is a significant cause of aggression in general, and the #1 cause of aggression in veterinary & shelter settings¹

¹Sophia Yin, DVM, MS

Faces of Fear



Dog Body Language

What your dog is desperately trying to tell you!



Now What?

- We've talked about what fear is, why it's important, and how to recognize it.
- What do we do with that information?
 - Prevention
 - Making Fear Worse
 - How to Help

Prevention is Best

- Sensitive Period for Socialization 3-12 weeks¹
- What is socialization²?
 - Good socialization introduces a puppy to something new, maybe even challenges the puppy a little
 - **Good socialization provides a positive experience for the puppy**
 - Any time a puppy is not actively enjoying the socialization experience (at least by the end—it's okay if he learns to overcome a short challenge), there is the potential for doing more harm than good

¹Sophia Yin, DVM, MS

²www.clickertraining.com

Making Fear Worse

- Never punish! Punishing a fearful dog will make the fear worse
- Avoid forcing your dog to experience things that frighten her
 - Trying to show your dog that what she's afraid of is harmless won't help her "get over it" because fears are not rational
- Don't crate or confine your dog in a small area if she's fearful or phobic
 - Close confinement often makes the panic worse and can lead the animal to hurt herself trying to escape
- Fearful emotions are not much affected by rewards
 - The belief that fears can be rewarded by attention from people is a myth
 - Fear is under the control of Classical Conditioning¹ (think Pavlov's Dogs)
- **NO ACEpromazine²!** Doesn't reduce stress or address underlying anxiety

¹Dr. Barrett's *Importance and Application of Low Stress Handling in Companion Animal Practice*; 25Jan2015 WVMMA Conference

²Dr. Newcomb, Hillview Vet Hospital

What's Next?
How do we help a fearful
dog?

How to help a fearful dog?

- 1) Managing the Environment
 - *Always* part of the plan
- 2) Counterconditioning & Desensitization (CC&D)
 - *Usually* part of the plan
- 3) Medications and/or Non-pharmaceuticals
 - Often helpful and sometimes necessary

Foundation Concepts

- Trigger– what causes the fear
- Thresholds indicate the level of exposure which when gone over , the dog is no longer able to think
 - distance (too close)
 - duration (too close to something for too long)
 - quantity (too many)
 - quality (black dogs, big dogs, etc.)
- Success is better defined as “improvement” than “cure”.

Managing the Environment

- Management is always a part of the program!
- Sometimes, management alone is enough if you can prevent exposure to whatever causes her to be fearful (e.g. vacuum cleaner)
- Even when you're helping the dog develop skills to be comfortable with trigger¹, controlling exposure is still critical for success
 - Fearful experiences are cumulative (they add up!)
 - More fearful experiences → more fear → more fearful experiences; repetition helps “hardwire” this process
 - Dogs often generalize bad experiences in one situation (e.g. vet, groomer) to being fearful in the rest of life²

¹The **trigger** is what causes the fear

² Susan Barrett, DVM; the Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center

Counterconditioning & Desensitization (CC&D)

- *Desensitization* involves the gradual exposure of the animal to the person, place or thing that triggers the fear, but in such a way that it doesn't actually cause a fearful response
 - Intensity of the trigger is affected by distance, duration, quantity, & quality
 - The dog (not the handler 😊) determines the pace of progress; if the dog is reacting, the trigger is too intense
- *Counter conditioning* changes your dog's negative (fearful) association with the scary thing(s) to a positive association
 - Think of it as training your dog's emotions rather than training his actions; behavior change will follow emotional change
 - Food is an excellent tool for counter conditioning

Medications & Non-pharmaceuticals

- Need to find a non-stressful starting place for CC&D (animal must be in a place of learning)
- If significantly over threshold, may need pharmaceutical intervention before starting CC&D
- Treating behavior problems w/drugs should be done only in three circumstances¹:
 - 1) Acute suffering—need to help animal feel better until you can get help from specialist
 - 2) As part of a complete treatment program
 - 3) Occasional/as needed basis for specific, predictable events (e.g. fireworks, climates with occasional thunderstorms)
- Several non-pharmaceutical offerings are available for mild symptoms or preventing behavior troubles (Zylkene, Anxitane)

More Resources

- Cautious Canine by Patricia McConnell
- Dogs are from Neptune by Jean Donaldson (various behavior modification case histories; excellent examples of applied counter conditioning and desensitization)
- “I Submit!” Pat Miller, Whole Dog Journal, April 2006 (www.whole-dog-journal.com)
- “Living in Fear” Marci Richmond, Whole Dog Journal, April 2006 (www.whole-dog-journal.com)
- Adaptil (formerly known as DAP)
- Through a Dog’s Ear...

Wondering

if something is

AVERSIVE?

It's up to the
DOG.

Copyright 2014
Awesome Dogs

Questions?