

Understanding Where Fear Comes From

By Carol Gannaway

Are you afraid of anything? What about spiders, rodents, birds or heights? Most everyone has a fear that gets his or her adrenaline going, heart racing and palms sweating. Is your dog fearful? There are plenty of things in the human world that can cause fearful reactions in dogs. Some dogs are afraid of vacuums, thunder, being left alone, other dogs or humans. Maybe you've had a dog that is afraid of men in hats, women in flowing skirts or children. Sometimes your dog might seem afraid and you don't know why! Just as with humans the list of things that cause your dog to be fearful is nearly endless. The more we understand about fear the better able we will be help our faithful companions live an anxiety free life.

It is interesting to consider where fear originates and why something might cause a fearful reaction in one dog and roll off the back of another. Some of the physical clues that your dog is having a fearful reaction are: barking, heart palpitations, panting, trembling or shaking, tail-up and straight, fur raised along the spine, cowering and growling. In dogs and all mammals there is variances in the make-up of our nervous systems and that is where a fearful reaction begins. In other words one animals are just more sensitive than others; high-strung verses laid back. The differences can be attributed not only to genetics variances but also to their and environment. It can be difficult to predict which experiences or environmental factors will create adrenaline pumping, heart racing, and life altering fear response. Consider the three-week-old puppy that inadvertently was separated from his littermates while the mother was having a potty break. The pup was howling and making a fuss throughout the separation from his mom and littermates. When the caretaker of the litter picked him up and put him back with the others she didn't give it another thought. Once the puppy was returned to the litter his heart slows down and all his bodily functions return to normal. This one-time sense of panic, the feeling of fear when left alone could translate later in life to separation anxiety issues for some dogs.

In the brain there is a little almond-shaped nuclei called the amygdala. The amygdala is the controller and interpreter of information that comes into the brain from the senses. It plays a central role in emotional learning, and the displays of aggression and fearfulness. It is key to the flight-fight-freeze reactions that dogs and people display when confronted with fear. Once the amygdala has been imprinted with a situation that has a fearful outcome that image will remain imprinted forever. That imprint of fear can be modified but the initial fearful reaction will be the default. It is easy then to appreciate why separation issues or fear of people troubles take dedication to get a positive result.

Puppies between the ages of eight and ten weeks go through a fear imprint period that has a profound effect on how the rest of their life will play out. Imagine a litter Labrador-mix puppies you can see how easy it is for things to turn into a fearful event. The main caretaker of this litter of puppies is a single mother of two teenaged daughters. The puppies have been socialized with the woman and her daughters but they had little experience with men. When the puppies were eight weeks old and ready to go to their new homes a man came by to look for a new companion and spend some time interacting with the puppies. He had a loud voice, handled the puppies solidly, was wearing a ball cap and had a beard. The man picked a robust male pup but sitting in the back was a sensitive male pup that did not approach the man, sat frozen in the back with his heart pounding, paws sweating. Although the pup would recover from the feeling of fear once the loud man left the fearful memory had found a home in the amygdala. Genetic difference and environmental factors both played a roll in the outcome for these two puppies. Then a woman came to look at the pups, the sensitive male approached, he is familiar with women, gets picked and heads to his new home and doesn't see another man for weeks. When this sensitive pup next sees the man, his amygdala springs into action and he freezes. The man has a beard and a hat and keeps on approaching the pup with his arms outstretched. The pup's heart is racing and he can't back up any farther (flight and freeze are no longer options) his only choice is fight so he growls and bears his teeth. The man keeps approaching so the pup snaps at the man. The man is frustrated, dogs always like him, but he finally walks away. All this time the woman is talking to her pup telling him it is okay not to be afraid, she finally removes the pup from the room so she can continue her visit and the pup settles down in the other room.

From these examples you can see how easily a fearful imprint with lifelong impacts can happen. How should we as advisors for our canine companions help them overcome their fears? It is not easy but with thoughtful consideration improvement can be achieved. Just to put this idea of overcoming fears into perspective, I consider how I feel about rats...eeech! I see a flurry out of the corner of my eye and my first thought is, "Rat!" In my 53 years I have only really had fleeting encounters or brief viewings of rats but my heart races and hands sweat every time I even think there might be a rat. Just as it is for the dogs mentioned earlier who will have to address their fear of separation and men, because dogs must be left at home from time to time and there are men everywhere, I need to address my fear of rats. My goal is to become an animal behaviorist and I will need to touch rats and interact with them regularly. My heart is racing and my palms are sweating as I write this. My saving grace will be that I will only be interacting with white rats not the gray kind you see out and about. Would I give up my dream because of my fear of rats? No, but how long before my heart doesn't pound. I don't know that answer to that yet.

Changing fearful experiences into anticipated ones is a long road. The amygdala has a long memory but it is possible through reducing stress, diversion of attention and creating a positive outcome that unreasonable fear can be alleviated. For the two puppies in this article the sensitive pup with the fear of men would most likely have an easier time overcoming his fear through counter conditioning. Starting to link the sight of men with a food reward. This situation would be easy to control and there would be plenty of time at home when no men are around for the puppy to be stress free.

The puppy that is anxious about being left alone would take a lot more effort and consideration because essentially every time you go to the bathroom and close the door or go outside to get the newspaper you “abandon” your pup and fear sets in. The stressful feeling a fear is there in an instant and remains quite steady during separation. Upon your return there is another burst of heart racing excitement. It is easy to see why this fearful reaction would be harder to extinguished because it happens more often; day in and day out.

The bottom line for changing behavior is slow and steady wins the race. Slow is fast in all counter conditioning plans, it is best not to rush the process. When you feel like your dog is “acting fearful” remember it is no act. The nervous system and brain are sending messages to your dog’s body that cannot be ignored. Staying as calm as possible during training and keeping the situation as stress free as possible for you and your dog will help you reach your goal of diminished fears.

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