



Sensitive or reactive? How can we help build their trust in us?

Not all fearful, nervous dogs will display or communicate their fear with us by hitting the deck or trying to run and get away. Sometimes it can be displayed as snarling, snapping and biting too. These types of dogs feel that they have been pushed into a corner (not literally) and feel the only way they can get out of the situation is to 'take care of it themselves' by barking, lunging, growling and snapping to make the scary thing go away.

Whether our dog is the scaredy 'cat' or the reactive rover, chances are both are fearful and we need to address how they are trying to tell us these things, before they get to extreme behaviours such as trying to run away or barking at the thing that makes them scared. Dogs have a wide range of ways they try to communicate to us through body language before having to resort to extreme measures it's just that we often miss them or misinterpret them.

Early signs that the dog is feeling threatened or fearful - sniffing randomly or stopping to scratch their collar randomly. Then licking their lips, turning their head away blinking, nose licking, yawning. Of course, dogs will do all of these things when they are not feeling threatened but within context - for example if you have just given your dog a tasty treat, he may often lick his lips after, or he may yawn if tired.

Low to Mid-level signs your dog is feeling threatened or fearful – turning body away, pawing sitting (not when asked/prompted) walking away, creeping low with ears back.

Mid to high level gestures – standing crouched, tail tucked under. Lying down (often on side or back) with front leg lifted.

High level - Stiffening up, staring, growling

Highest level – snapping, snarling, biting

The behaviours I have just listed are the main parts of what is called the ladder of aggression, if our dogs are faced with things they are fearful of enough times and we have missed the low level signs they will often skip the lower stages and resort to the higher levels as they have found that only the higher levels have worked before – i.e. the threat has gone away or you have taken them away once they have displayed these behaviours. If you have a dog that has found skipping certain signals pays don't lose hope, they will learn to

show the lower ones again once we have worked on helping them feel safe, so they no longer need to resort to these drastic measures.

Now we know what to look for and assuming you know what your dog is fearful of we can start working on how we can help them.

The biggest thing you can do to help your dog is to work on things from a distance. Trying to help them when they are already trying to run away or are growling etc is not going to help – they cannot learn or listen to you when they are internally in a frenzy and only concerned about keeping themselves safe.

Let's look at it from a human perspective – if you are fearful or phobic of spiders or snakes or similar there will be four categories of distance and reaction that you will have. The physical distance away from the spider/snake for each will be different for each person just as it will be for a dog. It also depends on the situation which I will explain too.

Distance 1 – its far enough away that you are not concerned in the slightest, maybe haven't noticed it (too far away to train a dog and for it to have a positive effect).

Distance 2 – you are aware of where it is you can comfortably look away, but look to check where it is often / fairly frequently. At the same time you would still be able to hold a conversation with someone and learn if required (ideal distance to train your dog).

Distance 3 – you are on the edge, you are almost in panic mode, an inch closer and you would panic (this is what's called 'on the threshold' in dogs, not ideal to train at this distance but should you get to this point you will find your dog is likely snatching treats faster than when working at distance 2 and their movement is faster and actions almost frantic, but not displaying high level behaviours as yet).

Distance 4 – all out panic, you may freeze but there is no way you could take in any information from a friend or family member no matter how much they shout, or touch you at this point (this is where dogs will display the higher level behaviours, are not able to respond to any commands as they are in full panic, self-preservation mode – impossible to train).

When you are in the zone of distance two, make things fun, play with your dog, let them sniff things, throw treats to the floor for them to hunt and find. Teach them how to 'look, look back' let them look toward the thing they are scared of for a second or two then prompt them to look back toward you and reward them, then let them look at the object/item/animal again, prompt for them to look at you and reward. Repeat and repeat lots of times. With enough time and practice will find you won't have to prompt them to look back at you they will do this automatically, and again with more time and practice they will also tell you they are not sure by looking at something then looking back at you and doing it a few times to make it clear, even if we have missed what they are scared of being present.

What not to do – don't let them look/stare for too long, the longer they stare the more likely they are to react adversely, as the fear builds. If, however they cannot look back at you this normally means you are on threshold/distance 3 or about to be in distance 4 so start at a further distance away. Ideally we should only let them look at the thing they are scared of for around 2 seconds before prompting them to look back if needed.

If you find your dog is getting more frantic, snatching treats or reacts by displaying the higher-level behaviours, although this isn't ideal don't panic, don't say a word just take them away from the situation, giving more distance again.

Don't work on this for more than a few minutes each time.

Once you have a reliable look, look back at distance 2 you can start to move forward slowly, toward the thing they are fearful of, it may only be by a couple of feet or a metre at a time, work on look, look back again. Give them breaks at a further distance away often before working on getting closer again. At all times be mindful of your dog and what they are trying to tell you in their body language. If they are at the end of the lead pulling to get to it or away from it, you are too close and need to work farther away again for a while.

This isn't an overnight fix, but it helps them build confidence and trust in you if you take it slow and stay calm.

Another common method for this is to teach the dog to sit or down and stare at their owner, to not look at the item they are fearful of and to trust in their owner that its ok when told to do this. It is very rare I will use this method as it isn't very reliable and may at some point send your dog's progress backward if the thing they are scared of (often another dog) approaches, taking them over threshold and you have not moved them away. This would be similar to someone throwing a spider on you and you have a phobia of spiders after they have asked you to stay still, you would trust their requests in future would you? The dog then has less trust in you to look after them and take care of the situation as they perceive you as putting them in that position of fear. On the rare occasion I do use it, it's in an emergency and only briefly when I can be certain something isn't going to come any closer to them.

Another thing to consider is what else they have experienced that day or the two days previous. For example, if we get out of bed and stub our toe, then make a coffee and spill it within 30minutes of getting up its certain to be a bad day, we are in a bad mood and anything that happens following that makes us even more likely to react badly. Usually by early afternoon we can get over it, but dogs are different – for them it takes 72 hours to get back to normal!

If your dog has been fearful of a couple of things in a short period of time – seeing two dogs separately but within the same walk for example when they see the third they are more likely to react with more intensity, even if at the same distance as they were from the previous two. The more occurrences the more likely they are to increase the behaviour to feel safe.

You will have bad days and good, sometimes you will need to just give up and go home and start again tomorrow – that's ok! As long as you are gradually getting more good days than bad then you are making progress, no matter how small. Stay calm, take it slow and your dog will make progress and build that trust in you that you can keep them safe.

Space is everything to dogs, both in distance and in time!