

PROTOCOL FOR TREATING FEARFUL BEHAVIOR IN CATS AND DOGS

Overview of Fear

Fearful behavior can be either idiopathic (meaning that it developed spontaneously, because of something inside the animal, and that nothing external caused it) or associated with some causal event (teasing by a child, being bitten by another animal). Fear is poorly understood in both human medicine and in veterinary behavioral medicine, but it can be absolutely crippling for anyone experiencing it.

Fear and anxiety are related neurochemically and behaviorally, but they are not identical conditions or descriptions. The difference is easiest to see in the behavior. Fearful animals withdraw and signal that they do not wish to interact. If compelled to do so, they usually become more frightened and either withdraw even more (some animals freeze) or they become frantic (some animals panic). Anxious animals signal uncertainty and show many of the behavioral components we see associated with fear, but their behavior is characterized by an incomplete commitment to one behavioral outcome. They are uncertain about how they respond and may get some information about this by provoking the situation. Some anxious animals may become more reactive, while others become less reactive. Their response depends on their diagnosis and on what other individuals in the interaction do. This pattern of having a flexible response depending on the behaviors of others is also a component of normal social behavior, but when the behavior is pathological, one key aspect is changed: the provocation or solicitation for information—and the response to it—are both out of context.

Roles for Age and Development

In the first 2 months of life, both cats and dogs go through periods that have often been called “socialization periods,” but might best be called “sensitive periods.” During these times, kittens and puppies begin to explore the world around them. If puppies and kittens are not exposed to varying social and physical stimuli during these sensitive periods, they may be at risk for behaving inappropriately in those situations later in life.

- For example, cats who are not handled by people until 14 weeks of age may never become calm with people. In fact, to maximize the cat’s potential for friendly and calm behavior they should be handled daily from 2 to 9 weeks of age.
- Dogs who don’t see people until after 5 to 8 weeks of age (when they are first aware that humans exist), may become fearful of any approaches—friendly and not—by people.

In general, a very small amount of exposure to a stimulus is required during puppyhood or kittenhood to ensure that the animal does not become afraid. A good rule of thumb is that the more nontraumatic exposure that the animal can have, the better. For kittens, being exposed to people from 2 to 9 weeks of age, especially, turns out to be much more important than people anticipated. Puppies should also be exposed early, although they tend to focus more on their littermates than they do on people until they are about 4 to 6 weeks of age.

It is important to start young animals out on the right foot. The **Protocol for Basic Manners Training and Housetraining**

for **New Dogs and Puppies**, the **Protocol for the Introduction of a New Pet to Other Household Pets**, and the **Protocol for Preventing and Treating Attention-Seeking Behavior** can all help with this.

Helping Your Young Dog or Cat to Learn About the World

Meanwhile, please expose your cats and dogs to all the experiences you think they will routinely have.

- All cats should be comfortable walking on a harness, being bathed and brushed, having their teeth brushed, having their claws trimmed, getting into and out of a carrier, going for a car ride, going to the vet’s office, and being manipulated for a veterinary exam.
- All dogs should be comfortable walking on a no-pull harness, head collar or humane collar and lead, going for a car ride, going to the vet’s office, being manipulated for a veterinary exam, going to a park where there are children and other dogs, and meeting other dogs on the street. Small dogs should also be comfortable with getting into and out of carriers.

If your cat or dog is having trouble learning to be comfortable in these situations, or is already uncomfortable in these situations, please work with a veterinary professional or a certified professional dog trainer to teach your dog and cat how to enjoy these activities. The earlier you intervene, the better. Puppies and kittens who are fearful do not just grow out of it—they almost always worsen with age. Many trainers and behavioral specialists are now emphasizing how important it is to teach dogs and cats to participate in their own medical care by offering body parts for examination. Such techniques make the exam more fun and less worrisome for the dog and cat, and much less stressful for you and the veterinary staff.

When Should You Start to Worry About Your Pet’s Fear?

A small amount of fear in unfamiliar situations is good and adaptive. This is what stops us from doing foolish and potentially fatal things. Fear becomes an abnormal response when it actively interferes with normal social interaction. We now know that many animals and humans who have problems with fear have an underlying abnormality with their brain chemistry. This is why so many of these animals respond so well to antianxiety medication. Some very profound fearful and panic behaviors in dogs appear to begin to be displayed at social maturity (about 18 to 24 months of age; range: 12 to 36 months of age). Humans, too, develop profound fears during social maturity. Current thought suggests that this is because the brain prunes and remodels some brain cells and shifts neurochemistry. Such modification is normal, but different aspects may go awry and contribute to fearful behavior.

Treating Fear

The keys to treating fear include:

- early recognition of your dog’s or cat’s fearful response (does she hide, whine, press against you, urinate, seek out another pet), so that you know when she is distressed; this

will allow you to accurately assess whether your pet improves with work and/or time,

- identification of the situations in which the cat or dog is fearful so that they can be avoided, which avoids “practicing” learning to be fearful,
- gradual desensitization and counter-conditioning of your dog or cat to the stimuli that have made her fearful, and
- rewarding your dog or cat any time she is not behaving fearfully.



Dog who is afraid of unknown humans. Even the presence of her housemate is not enough of a “safety signal” to have her not worry. This dog either hides in corners or turns her back when faced with unfamiliar humans.

Tick List of Actions to Take to Treat Fearful Behavior

1. Practice the **Protocol for Deference**, the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**, and the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**. Only after you have completed these can you begin to work with the specific **Tier 2** protocols that are designed

to desensitize and counter-condition your pet to the problematic situations. And, yes, most parts of these programs are easily adapted for use in cats.

2. Until you reach the second phase of the behavior modification programs, please make sure that you **avoid** all the circumstances in which your cat or dog becomes distressed. Please make sure that you understand that you are not “giving in” to the problem. Instead, think of this as protecting the pet. Nothing renders us more helpless and distressed than to be continually put in scary situations over which we have no control and from which we cannot escape. With time and treatment, the number of situations from which your dog or cat must be protected may diminish, but this cannot happen if she is not protected from them at the outset.
3. If you must expose your cat or dog to something she finds distressing, please consider using a mild anti-anxiety agent that may have both a calming effect on the pet and a disruptive effect on learning fear. Members of the benzodiazepine class of drug have these properties when given at the appropriate dosage. See the **Generalized Guidelines for Using Alprazolam for Noise and Storm Phobias, Panic, and Severe Distress** for some guidance. Discuss with your veterinarian whether this is a good option for your pet. Often when these medications are used for particularly scary, occasional situations (e.g., going to the vet) they prevent the fearful reaction and can help start your cat or dog on the path to learning to enjoy formerly distressing situations.
4. If you have a cat who is afraid of carriers or veterinary visits, learn how to help your cat to have less stressful and more humane veterinary visits. See the following resources for additional help: *Healthy Cats for Life* (www.healthycatsforlife.com/clinic.html) and *Catalyst Council* (www.catalystcouncil.org/resources/video/?Id=88).
5. Whenever your cat or dog is calm, tell her that she is brilliant. If you can further reward your cat or dog with love, play, massage, or treats without making her more reactive, do it. The single most commonly wasted opportunity is the one that’s easiest to implement: just tell your dog or cat that she is good when she is quiet and calm, even if this means talking to her when she is asleep.
6. Please do not tell your dog or cat that it is okay when it is not okay. No abnormally fearful response is truly okay for the individual experiencing it. Although your intentions are good, what you are really doing is giving your dog or cat conflicting signals. She knows it’s not okay—that’s why she is scared. The risk here is that you may accidentally be rewarding behaviors associated with distress by trying to reassure your pet. Unless you have taught your pet that “okay” means to take a deep breath and relax—and this can be done—avoid trying to jolly your pet from her fearful response. It won’t work and will just be another failure for your pet. If your dog or cat will allow it, you can put some firm, gentle pressure on her using your hands or body. This type of closeness provides reassurance and the physical pressure, if gentle, may help your pet to relax by relaxing her muscles. If you are going to pet your dog or cat, please do so only in a slow, firm manner. Rough and fast stroking makes your dog and cat more reactive, even if you are doing it in play.

7. **Do not try to bribe any animal into not being fearful.** It will not work, and you may be doing harm. What will work is to teach the dog or cat to sit for a food treat and relax. Then, we can calmly and gradually introduce the fearful situation so that your cat or dog learns to associate the situation with good things. That is the principle underlying the first phases of the behavior modification programs.
 8. **Please do not force any cat or dog to be in a situation where she is becoming progressively more panicked.** Many people think that if the puppy is upset, you should drag him over to the thing that's upsetting him and he will "get over it." *This is wrong.* You will make your dog or cat worse. Watch your cat's or dog's behavior: if she tries to escape in a more active manner, looks away, pants, shakes, drools, or widens her pupils, she is distressed and scared. Get her out of the situation as soon as possible. Don't try to convince anyone that it is okay, if profound fear or terror is involved. A quiet presence can be reassuring. Then, when your cat or dog is ready to take some guidance, you are there to provide it.
 9. **Do not use physical punishment.** It's guaranteed to make your cat or dog worse, and possibly aggressive. Punishing someone who is fearful can only be about our own frustration.
 10. Warn friends who might interact with your pet how you would like them to do so. If your dog or cat tolerates a visitor's presence, ask the visitor not to reach for or look at your pet until she solicits them. Then the visitor must be calm, quiet, and clear in all interactions. If the visitor is trustworthy, you can provide treats so that the visitor can practice having the pet sit calmly for rewards.
- Emphasize to your guests that it is important for them to help your pet, and that their behaviors must be in the best interests of the dog or cat needing the help. If your friends will not comply with your instructions and requests, please separate them and your cat or dog.
11. Please **do not** forcibly extract a fearful pet from an area in which she is hiding. You may be bitten, which will make the event worse for the cat or dog. Instead, speak calmly and try to coax the cat or dog. If this fails, leave a dish of food a slight distance away from the hiding hole and just sit there. When your dog or cat comes out, do not reach for her—just talk softly. She will eventually come to you. Let your dog or cat set the pace of the interaction. Be calm.
 12. Some harnesses and head collars can help dogs to relax because they don't permit the dog to intensify the fearful behavior, and instead apply constant, firm but gentle pressure. Harnesses prevent cats from bolting and so may blunt some fearful behaviors. Please remember that cats recover from stressful events by hiding. After you have blunted a panicky event, let the cat recover.
 13. Please remember that fearful animals may need extra protection when outside. The world is an unpredictable place, and for a fearful animal this is a nightmare.
 14. Antianxiety medications can help fearful dogs and cats, and they may help you to implement the behavior modification. *Studies have shown that anti-anxiety medication increases the rate at which dogs can learn behavior modification and improve.* Some dogs or cats need anti-anxiety medication on a daily basis, some may only need it occasionally, but for profoundly affected fearful animals, humane care will involve the use of antianxiety medications plus behavior modification.