



## Fearful Behavior

**Congratulations!  
You have adopted a new family member.**

As your adoption counselor discussed with you, your dog displayed fearful behavior, especially around humans, while here at AHS. What does this mean? It means your dog may be more likely to exhibit fearful behavior around new people, places, and things. Fearful behavior is both treatable and manageable.

Dogs may display a variety of behaviors when they are afraid. A frightened dog may attempt to escape, show submissive behaviors such as inappropriate urination, or they may freeze and refuse to move. Some dogs will react aggressively towards whatever it is that is causing them fear. They may bark or growl and in extreme cases, snap at you. Fearful dogs may also become destructive in the home. We suggest you read through the following, and start working with your dog the moment you enter your home.

### The Plan

- **Be aware of your body language at all times with your dog.** Keep a sideways stance to your dog and avoid eye contact. Be sure new people coming into your home are aware of their own body posture and follow the same guidelines. Approaching a fearful dog with a frontal stance and eye contact can cause them to become more fearful because it communicates aggression to your dog.
- **Ignore all your dog's fearful behavior.** We do not mean ignore it and force your dog into situations he is uncomfortable in anyway. What we mean is do not cuddle, pet, and talk to him while he is displaying the fearful behavior. If you do, you are rewarding him for the behavior and he will continue to do it.
- **Keep tasty treats around the house, especially for the first few weeks.** Any time your dog approached you or other family members and guests on his own, praise him quietly and reward him with some of the tasty treats. Do the same when he explores new rooms or object in your home. This way you are teaching him that being brave and exploring equals good things and tasty food.
- **When a stranger comes over, give them a tasty treat to give your dog when he approaches them.** If your dog does not approach, ignore him. Do not force him to greet the new person unless he wants to.
- **If your dog likes other dogs, arrange to go for your walks with other dogs.** Having other dogs around will help to boost his confidence.

## **Desensitization and Counter Conditioning**

Some fearful behavior is caused by very specific objects or circumstances. If you begin to identify things that your dog is afraid of, there are several techniques you can try to help them get past their fear.

### **Desensitization**

1. Begin by exposing your dog to a very low level or amount of whatever is causing this behavior. For example, if he is afraid of bicycles, start with a bicycle placed far away from your dog.
2. Reward him for calm, non-fearful behavior while he is near the bicycle. Gradually move the bicycle closer to him. Keep rewarding him as long as he remains relaxed. If he starts to become anxious, move the bicycle further away and proceed more slowly.
3. Continue this process until your dog is comfortable with the object that causes him fear. Keep in mind this may take several days, weeks, or months, depending on how intense your dog's fear is. Make sure you do not try to rush the process or you may make your dog even more afraid.

### **Counter Conditioning**

This builds off of the desensitization process. While your dog is in the presence of whatever makes him anxious, ask him to perform some obedience tricks such as "sit." Reward him for obeying and continue to reward him and ask different commands as the bicycle moves closer. If your dog does not know commands, teach him some with treats and praise. **NEVER USE PUNISHMENT TO TRAIN YOUR DOG!** Collar corrections or scolding will cause him to associate both the object that scares him and you as negative.

### **When to Get Help**

Because these techniques are not easy to do, and because doing them incorrectly can make the behavior much worse, you may want to consult with a behavior specialist or trainer to get some professional, in-home help. If, at any time, your dog displays any sort of fear-based aggression such as growling, snarling, snapping, or baring his teeth stop all the behavior modification work immediately and seek professional help from a behaviorist!