

# FEARFUL DOGS

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Find additional resources at  
[pasadenahumane.org/behavior](https://pasadenahumane.org/behavior).

Dogs who are fearful may avoid eye contact, tuck their tails, lick their lips, pretend to ignore their handler, hide, cower, or tremble. Some may even growl and bark. Different things scare different dogs, so it's important to identify your dog's triggers.

Follow these guidelines to help your new dog build confidence and become less afraid of the world around them.

## Generalized Fear

These rules apply to all kinds of fearfulness, regardless of the trigger. Some dogs may be fearful of multiple things, in which case these rules would still apply.

- Provide the dog with a safe place, such as a crate or isolated room, so the dog has a secure place to go and decompress if they are feeling anxious.
- Don't push the dog before they are ready! If the dog encounters something scary to them and they show body language indicating stress, such as backing away or lip licking, turn around and leave the situation immediately. Return to a safe, quiet place to reassure your dog.
- Always comfort and reassure your scared dog! This will not encourage them to be more fearful; it will make them trust you more. If they trust you and believe you will protect them, they will feel more confident confronting scary things.
- If you want to slowly acclimate your dog to something they are afraid of, introduce it to the dog from a distance that the dog feels is safe. Feed the dog lots of treats and gently reassure them to create a more positive association.
- If a dog chooses to interact with something they are typically afraid of, give lots of praise and reward with treats!

Everyone has their limits. Your dog may never fully overcome their fears, and it's important not to force them to interact with something they are uncomfortable with. You may need to make some adjustments to accommodate your dog's needs. For example, your dog may never be comfortable going into public with you. Instead, prepare a safe place in your home, such as a crate, where your dog can stay when you go out, and make sure you are home enough to give your dog the attention they need.

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## Fear of People

The rules of generalized fear also apply to the fear of people. Generally, a dog with a fear of people may have a hard time interacting with strangers, or one particular kind of person may trigger them. Here are some more tips to address fear of people specifically.

- In general, the dog should not live in a home with the kind of people they are afraid of. For example, a dog who is afraid of children should go to a home that does not have any children.
- Some dogs may experience fear of specific kinds of people. Typical groups of people your dog may be afraid of are children, men, women, and strangers. When new or scary people are around your dog, have them sit in a chair or on the floor if possible and do not make direct eye contact with the dog. Have the scary person toss delicious treats to your dog. If the dog is willing to eat the treat, the person can offer a treat from their hand. Only allow the dog to take treats directly from the person if they are showing no signs of fearful behaviors.
- Any new or scary person should not approach or pet the dog. Instead, allow the dog to choose whether or not they are ready to approach the new person. Never touch a fearful dog who has not touched you first! A dog will ask for attention by nudging or leaning into a person.
- If the dog likes to play, give the dog's favorite toy to the new person to make them seem more appealing.
- Don't bring the dog to any crowded public places.
- If your dog chooses to meet a person they may typically be afraid of, give them lots of praise and treats.
- End all interactions with people on a positive note. If a dog is just starting to get more comfortable around people, keep positive interactions brief and do not wait for them to burn out and have a fear response.

## Environmental Fear

The rules of generalized fear also apply to environmental fear. When a dog is fearful of their environment, they may experience stress when acclimating to new spaces. They may not have been socialized properly or did not go to many new places when they were young, so adjusting to new places is a challenge. They may also be experiencing fear of specific stimuli in their environment. A dog can be afraid of loud noises, bright lights, or even indoor settings if they have never been inside a building. Here are some tips to address environmental fear.

- When acclimating your dog to their new home, start in one quiet room of the house. Keep the lights low and the noise to a minimum.
- Let the dog get comfortable in this space and start to explore these surroundings before introducing them to the rest of the house. Too big an area can be overwhelming for a dog experiencing environmental fear.

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- Make the first place they acclimate to a safe space they can return to whenever they are scared. A quiet bedroom with a crate could be the perfect safety zone for your dog.
- When walking your dog, start off walking in your neighborhood and stay close to home. If your dog becomes fearful and refuses to walk on a leash, it will be easier to carry them a shorter distance to get home.
- Avoid bringing the dog into public spaces until they are totally acclimated to their new home. When you begin to introduce new spaces, start with quiet places and have a good escape plan if your dog becomes overwhelmed.
- Reward with treats every time your dog explores a new space on their own. Remember, a dog who is fearful of their environment is not necessarily afraid of people—a fearful dog may seek you or other people out for comfort and reassurance. Make sure to reassure them and make them feel more secure if they seek you out!

**Remember:** Never try to desensitize your dog by exposing them to scary things over and over again without making positive associations. This will likely make your dog’s fear even worse. Never scold a dog for being afraid either; the dog can’t help that they feel afraid, and they probably need some reassurance! It is also helpful to remember not to reprimand or scold a dog that has shown fear by growling or barking. A fearful dog who is constantly exposed to their fears can develop into a reactive dog who snaps or bites. But a fearful dog whose feelings and limitations are respected can become a happier, more confident dog! Seek a positive reinforcement trainer who understands fearful behavior to continue training and socialization.

**We are always here to help! You can find additional behavior and training resources at [pasadenahumane.org/behavior](https://pasadenahumane.org/behavior).**

*Adapted from Northeast Animal Shelter*



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