



Understanding and Handling Your Dog's Worries— and Building Confidence in Any Dog

Author's Note, 2020: *When I first wrote this article many years ago, the purpose was to help those dogs and puppies I saw who were a little fearful, anxious, and defensive in the face of new experiences. However, the basic concepts in this article—understanding how dogs communicate and how to effectively respond in a positive, gentle way—have been beneficial to many dog owners. Puppies can learn that the world is a fun, welcoming place; rescue dogs can adapt to new situations and overcome minor worries; and any dog can become more confident and socially savvy. Moreover, every dog owner has something to gain by learning about how his or her dog understands a given experience and how s/he communicates. Thus, if you are looking to:*

- **Establish a foundation of trust with your dog,**
- **Foster confidence and resiliency in your dog, and/or**
- **Develop a toolkit for how to handle your dog's initial worry or fear in a wide range of situations...**

Please read on.

Dogs can express fear, apprehension, or discomfort with a situation or experience in many different ways. Get to know how your dog expresses these states of mind. Dogs can display more than one signal, or signals that seem conflicting. Dogs also vary in how quickly they may escalate into increasingly agitated or fearful states—and in how far they will go when they feel threatened (biting, panicking, running away, etc.). A dog under stress has few options: fight back, escape/avoid (not always an option), or mentally/physically shut down. It's our job as responsible, humane dog owners to recognize when our dogs are not comfortable and change the situation for them; part of working with our dogs around fear issues is creating an environment and opportunity that allows them to overcome (or lessen) fear in a productive, safe way.

Several of our classes and workshops are designed to help dog owners: safely, carefully, and productively introduce their dogs to new experiences; understand how dogs interpret our world; and learn how dogs communicate using body language. The information below supplements this instruction and serves as a high-level introduction to several concepts related to building a dog's confidence and gently introducing a dog to new experiences. ***The information in this article is not a substitute for professional advice, care, diagnosis, or treatment.***

What These Techniques Are For (and Not For!)

The techniques described in this article are meant to help with those situations where a dog or shows mild to moderate worry an object/new experience (e.g., vacuum cleaners, garbage cans, other objects that s/he might encounter in our human world). These techniques are not directly applicable to fear/worry about other dogs/animals, humans, or being left alone; these issues may call for assessment and other techniques. If your dog is dealing with a deep-seated or severe fear or anxiety, there are a wide range of techniques that can help; seek out a qualified professional who will only use positive, gentle training techniques with your dog (i.e., avoid techniques that involve punishment, force, dominance/alpha theory—these may appear to “fix” a fearful or aggressive dog's behavior because it stops the dog from reacting—but the underlying reasons for the behavior remain unaddressed and may resurface with more severity).

Critical Concepts

- **Never force** your dog to socialize or engage.
- **When a dog is frightened or overwhelmed, this disables his/her ability to learn** and to respond to cues (commands).
- **Your dog's fear isn't silly.** While you may be shaking your head at why your dog is worried about that tree stump by the side of the road, it's a real worry to him/her.
- **Understanding your dog's body language** enables you to recognize fear, worry, and apprehension right away (*see the list at the end of this document for some of the most common “I'm not comfortable” signals*).



- **Understanding threshold** helps you identify when an experience is too much for your dog. Let's get a bit more into this concept:
 - **What's a threshold?** In your house, the space between rooms is marked by a threshold; when you move from one room to another, you cross the threshold. Dogs cross thresholds when they move from one emotional state to another. When a dog is perfectly ok with an experience we call this being *under threshold*. When an experience is too much for a dog, we call this being *over threshold*. And when we say "too much" we mean lots of kinds of "toos"— too agitated, too fearful, too uncomfortable, too excited, etc.. A dog that's a barking, lunging mess may be easy to identify as being over threshold, but other signs that a dog is over threshold may be much less obvious (but still very important): shutting down/avoidance, being distracted, not interested in favorite treats, unable to perform cues it knows, freezing, being overexcited.
 - **A dog that is over threshold is reacting—not thinking.** A dog that is over threshold isn't learning anything or taking anything positive from the situation. A dog that's over threshold isn't even hearing you. S/he is not able to learn. Learn your dog's body language to understand what precedes your dog being over threshold (and when your dog is back under threshold)—look for the signs that show your dog is moving from one emotional state to another.
 - **Even though a threshold in our house is fixed and constant, dog thresholds can change rapidly and dynamically—and are highly contextual.** Just as we are constantly responding to our environment and any given situation, in a dynamic and fluid way, so to are dogs. Many things may impact your dog's threshold: how much is going on, how close to the situation is your dog, how intense is the situation, etc.
- Part of becoming confident is learning that initially scary/stressful experiences have happy endings; ALWAYS strive to leave each exercise with a happy ending and success (even if success is simply being relaxed some distance from the stressor).
- It's never advisable to over-expose a dog to something s/he is afraid of in order to "get him/her used to it" (a technique called "flooding"¹). This is a dangerous and ill-advised approach, carrying the very real risk that the dog will be further traumatized. Instead, it is safer and more effective to use de-sensitization (exposing the dog to the stressor at levels where it is not frightening, and there is no negative outcome, to gradually allow the dog to understand that the stressor is not a threat) and counter-conditioning (pairing the stressor with positive experiences in order to change how the dog views the stressor).²
- The more (and the more diverse) experiences you can expose your dog to in a positive, gentle way, the more confident and mentally resilient your dog will be—able to handle new situations and able to deal with stress more effectively.

Understanding Dog Body Language: Stress and Fear Signals

Some of the more common signals that the dog is feeling stressed, fearful, or defensive are listed below. They are loosely categorized into fear, stress, and aggression—but these signals don't always fit into neat categories, and behavior can quickly move from one state to another (for example, fear to aggression). When attempting to understand body language, it's important to: 1. Observe each part of the dog's body (for example, ears, tail, mouth); 2. Observe the dog's entire body (if we only look at one body part, we may be missing critical information about what the dog is saying); and 3. Consider the context (what might the dog be reacting to, what may be new or different in the environment?). Observe your dog when he is most comfortable, relaxed, and happy—probably in your home with you—what does his/her body look like? Carefully observe tail, body, and ear carriage, facial expression, etc.—being intimately familiar with how your dog looks in a relaxed happy state will help you better identify when his/her body language changes in a stressful or new situation.³

Stress Signals

- Excessive blinking/dilated pupils
- Panting/drooling/licking lips

Fear/Apprehension

- Ears pinned back
- Wide eyed, shifty

¹ A technique which is based on exposing a subject to the highest level of stimulus, provoking in most cases, the highest level of response in order for a dog to "go through it" until he "realizes" that there is actually nothing dangerous in that particular situation (http://www.training-your-dog-and-you.com/Desensitizing_and_counter-conditioning.html).

² http://www.training-your-dog-and-you.com/Desensitizing_and_counter-conditioning.html

³ For more information about how to read dog body language, check out our "Woof! What is the Dog Saying" program: <https://www.goldstardog.com/woof/>



GOLD STAR Dog Training

- Pacing
- Shaking
- Hiding behind owner
- Less responsive to cues
- Excessive shedding
- Won't take treats
- Diarrhea or vomiting
- Shut down /avoidance
- Sweating through pads of feet
- Mouth clenched shut
- Tension in body
- Sudden appearance of dandruff
- Inability to eat or take a treat
- Tail tucked
- Squirmy
- Growling
- Barking
- Teeth showing
- Dog tries to make itself look small and retreated
- Tense body
- Hackles
- Mouth clenched shut
- Tension in body
- Lips raised or curled, teeth showing

Aggression

- Growling
- Barking
- Teeth showing
- Forward erect posture
- Tail up, might be wagging stiffly/quickly
- Direct stare
- Hackles

Strategies (What Do I Do?)

These are strategies we learn in our Basic/Essentials classes; if you have questions about the approach, please ask your instructor for guidance.

Your first strategy when your dog shows worry about an object (which you assess and understand by reading the dog's body language) should be taking advantage of your dog's natural curiosity and willingness to explore. Using the "touch it" technique as demonstrated in class and workshops (**to read about how to teach your dog the touch technique, check out the article "3 Critical Skills for Every Day and Every Dog" in the library at <http://goldstardog.com/library.php>**). Encourage your dog to explore this object (never drag the dog to it or force the dog to engage in any way!). Reward any investigation/engagement profusely (using food works best because it rewards the dog and creates a positive association to the target). If that doesn't work, try one or more of the techniques below.

- **Increase distance from the stressor:** Keep far enough away from the target that dog is under threshold—then you can slowly move closer as the dog becomes more comfortable (e.g., a vacuum cleaner across the room, in the next room).
- **Reduce intensity of the stressor:** Reduce the intensity to a point where the dog has no reaction to the stressor (e.g., vacuum cleaner turned off, not moving).
- **Play:** Make a positive association with the target by playing near/around it (gradually getting closer or increasing intensity).
- **Swiping:** Holding dog's attention with voice/treats/toy, walk past the target swiftly and with animation, gradually getting closer (the dog determines how close). This is best used when you teach the dog to have very focused attention on you for short bursts when moving with you...then you can use it around targets that elicit fear.
- **Movement:** Introducing movement can prevent your dog from standing rooted and fear, with intensity building. Move in a circle with your dog or walk your dog a bit away from the stressor, can help disperse the intensity.
- **Treats:** Place a string of treats to the target and/or place treats on the target.
- **Experienced dog:** Use a more experienced, calm dog (that your dog likes) to approach the target and see if your dog will be encouraged to also approach.
- **Give your dog a job:** Ask the dog to perform a behavior it knows well and can do easily, praise (this teaches dog what to do with itself in a stressful situation). But be aware that if your dog is stressed, he or she may not be able to execute the behavior and pushing or repeatedly asking the dog to do a behavior when stressed will only make the situation more stressful!



Remember that the end-goal of a session or experience may NOT be for your dog to make contact with the object or be totally present in the experience that s/he finds distressing! It may simply be to be calm and happy from a distance, to look at it and give a little tail wag, or not bark at it!

One last (but critical) piece of advice:

If your dog is behaving aggressively, is experiencing fear or stress that seems to be worsening or bleeding into other areas of your dog's life, or the situation seems to be escalating, **seek out professional help**.

References:

Help Your Shy Dog Gain Confidence (Whole Dog Journal): https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/9_4/features/Dog_Behavior_15800-1.html

Canine Body Language (Victoria Stilwell): <https://positively.com/dog-training/understanding-dogs/canine-body-language/>

Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide Interpreting the Native Language of the Domestic Dog (Brenda Aloff).

Canine Behavior: A Photo Illustrated Handbook (Barbara Handelman)

Thresholds, dials, and fear: managing your dog's stress levels (Victoria Stilwell) <https://positively.com/contributors/thresholds-dials-and-fear-managing-your-dogs-stress-levels/> (Training-Your-Dog-and-You.com)

Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning. https://www.training-your-dog-and-you.com/Desensitizing_and_counter-conditioning.html