

Fear of People

Like we do, dogs sometimes react fearfully to certain people. A dog is particularly likely to fear a specific person if that person looks different in some way than the people the dog already knows. For example, dogs are often frightened when they see a person wearing a hat or walking with a limp. But some dogs display fearful behavior when in the presence of many people. Many of these dogs only react fearfully to people of a specific gender, size, race or age. Others fear all unfamiliar people, regardless of type or appearance.

Why Are Some Dogs Afraid of People?

Inadequate Socialization to People

Dogs who didn't get enough exposure to a variety of people as young puppies might display fearful reactions to them as adults. Dogs go through developmental phases as they mature during which they learn different skills and attitudes. Not surprisingly, the majority of these phases occur while a dog is a puppy. Exposure to sights, sounds, people and animals during a dog's important developmental phases can have a profound effect on how the dog reacts to these things when she matures.

Genetic Predisposition to Fear People

Exposing a young puppy to a variety of pleasant experiences with new people, places, objects and other animals will help her mature into a well-adjusted adult dog. However, some dogs are just born with more timid personalities. These dogs might seem shy around unfamiliar people, loud, overbearing people or large groups of people, even if they've had adequate exposure to many people during puppyhood.

Traumatic Event Associated with the Presence of People

If a dog who was previously unafraid of people experiences a traumatic or painful event in the presence of a specific person, she might associate that person or people in general with the unpleasant experience.

No Discernible Cause

A dog who was previously unafraid of people will sometimes develop a fearful response to them for no obvious reason.

Medical Problems

Sometimes dogs who haven't been afraid of people in the past will suddenly seem fearful around them. Some medical problems, especially those that involve pain, can cause this reaction in dogs. If your dog becomes fearful around people and wasn't in the past, be sure to take her to a veterinarian to rule out medical causes.

Is It Really Fear?

Canine submissive body postures can be mistaken for fear. For example, if your dog rolls over, lowers her tail and whimpers when interacting with people but makes no attempt to avoid them, she might be displaying normal submissive body language, rather than acting fearfully. For more information about interpreting canine communication, please see our article, [Canine Body Language](#).

What to Do If Your Dog Fears People

Dogs respond to fear in different ways. Sometimes a frightened dog will retreat, try to run away, hide or display fearful body language, such as trembling, panting, avoidance, whining, salivating, lip licking, hiding behind familiar people or under furniture, or urinating. At other times, instead of trying to run away or avoid a frightening person, a dog will respond to fear with defensive aggression. Defensive reactions can include behaviors like barking, lunging, growling, snapping or biting.

Pet parents often mistake fear-related problems for stubbornness. If you ask your dog to perform a behavior that will increase her fear, she might refuse to obey. For instance, if you call your dog to come to you, but you're standing close to a person she fears, she might not respond to your command. Keep in mind, however, that if this happens, your dog isn't disobedient or stubborn. She's afraid. Her anxiety and fear might make it impossible for her to do whatever you've asked her to do. Instead of getting frustrated, try to focus on helping your dog overcome her fear. Read on to find out how.

If Your Dog Becomes Aggressive When Afraid

Some frightened dogs react by barking, growling, lunging, snapping or biting at people who scare them. This is called defensive aggression. A dog who reacts with aggression when afraid might also exhibit other kinds of fearful behavior, such as trembling, panting, whining, salivating, hiding behind people or under furniture, urinating, or attempting to run away.

If your dog displays aggressive behavior when she's afraid—or if you think she might—you'll need to do two things:

1. Contact a professional to help you try to change your dog's behavior.
2. Always carefully manage your dog's behavior to avoid or minimize problems and ensure that no one gets hurt. Management tips follow.

Manage Your Dog's Behavior

When animals experience extreme stress or fear, they often resort to aggression in their attempts to defend themselves from perceived threats. Although aggression as a form of defense is a natural response, it's dangerous. It's crucial to use management techniques that avoid or prevent the problem to protect other people, your dog and yourself. One of the best ways to avoid provoking your dog's aggressive response to fear is to avoid the person or people that frighten her.

Unfortunately, you might not be able to avoid people at all times. For example, say your dog fears strangers. You'll periodically need to take her to the vet, and you'll probably encounter unfamiliar people at the vet's office. Likewise, strangers might visit your home—either unannounced or for social gatherings.

If you know your dog might see people that frighten her, either out in the world or at home, follow these guidelines:

- Always keep your dog under your control. If you're out of the house, keep her on a leash. If people who frighten your dog visit your home, confine your dog in a crate, in a secure room or behind a baby gate. (Be sure to provide something fun for your dog to do while alone. Give her a special treat, like a chew bone or a food-stuffed KONG® toy. If your dog has a way to occupy herself, she'll feel less stressed and nervous.)
- Keep your dog as far away as possible from people who frighten her. Because she's afraid, your dog might growl, bark or even bite people who get too close to her or attempt to touch her.

- If people try to approach your dog when she's frightened or nervous, tell them to please stay away. Handling or attention from people who scare your dog will only increase her fear and might provoke defensive aggression. You can politely explain that because your dog isn't feeling comfortable, she doesn't want to visit.
- Keep your movements slow and your voice calm. If you seem anxious or upset, your dog might become even more afraid.
- If you unexpectedly encounter a person who frightens your dog, focus on calmly and quickly removing your dog from the situation. (See [The U-Turn](#), below, for advice about how to do this.)
- Consider muzzle training. Teaching your dog to wear a muzzle *before* she encounters people she fears can keep everyone safe. Please read our article, [Teaching Your Dog to Wear a Muzzle](#), to learn how to teach your dog to comfortably wear a muzzle.

Get Help

Because dogs can be dangerous when aggressive, it's crucial to seek help from a behaviorist. DO NOT attempt to resolve your dog's aggression problem on your own. A qualified professional can help you design and carry out a plan to change the way your dog feels and acts. If your dog shows fearful and aggressive behavior, consult a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB) or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB). If you can't find a behaviorist, you can seek help from a Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT), but be sure that the trainer is qualified to help you. Determine whether she or he has education and experience in treating fear and aggression, since this kind of expertise isn't required for CPDT certification. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Help](#), to locate one of these experts in your area.

If Your Dog Doesn't Become Aggressive When Afraid

Keep in mind that fear can trigger aggression. Even if your dog has never displayed aggression in the past, any dog can resort to aggressive behavior if he or she feels threatened or afraid. If a dog first tries to reduce her fear by escaping from a place or situation and that strategy doesn't work, she might then switch to defensive aggression. This is especially likely if people try to approach or touch her while she's frightened. If your dog has a fear-related behavior problem, be sure that you don't place people or other animals at risk by putting your dog in situations that might provoke aggressive behavior.

Key Points for Dealing with Your Dog's Fearful Behavior

It's crucial to avoid using punishment when trying to change your fearful dog's behavior. When something frightens your dog, she experiences a great deal of stress, and any kind of verbal or physical punishment will distress her even more, making her more defensive and fearful in the future.

Avoid using treats to lure your dog closer to people who frighten her. Doing so can actually intensify your dog's fear. It might also provoke defensive aggression. Sometimes a dog will follow a food lure and move closer to a person she fears because she wants the food, but then take the morsel and bite the person before running away.

To help your fearful dog, you must first identify the specific person or type of person who triggers her fear. In the case of a dog who didn't meet enough new people as a puppy, the trigger might be specific individuals, like men, children, or people with beards, sunglasses, hats or canes. After you've identified all the people that frighten your dog, you'll need to do two things:

1. Use management techniques to minimize or avoid provoking your dog's fear.
2. Design and implement a treatment plan to change the way she feels and acts.

Management Techniques

Fearful behavior in dogs takes a while to treat. During this time, it's important to avoid increasing your dog's fear, so she should be kept away from people who frighten her. If possible, avoid taking your dog to places where the two of you might encounter people who scare her.

Unfortunately, you might not always be able to avoid people who scare your dog. For example, say your dog fears strangers. You'll periodically need to take her to the vet, and you'll probably encounter unfamiliar people at the vet's office. Likewise, strangers might visit your home—either unannounced or for social gatherings.

If you know your dog might see people she fears, either out in the world or at home, follow these guidelines:

- Always keep your dog under your control. If you're away from your home, keep your dog on a leash. If people who frighten your dog visit your home, confine your dog in a crate, in a secure room or behind a baby gate. Give your dog something fun to do while she's alone. A special treat, like a chew bone or a food-stuffed KONG toy will give her a way to occupy herself, and she'll feel less stressed and nervous. (To learn more about puzzle toys and how to use them, please see our article, [How to Stuff a KONG Toy](#).)
- Keep your dog as far away as possible from people who scare her. Because she's afraid, your dog might growl, bark or even bite people who get too close to her or attempt to touch her, even if she hasn't behaved aggressively in the past.
- If people try to approach your dog when she's frightened or nervous, tell them not to do so. Handling or attention from people who scare your dog will only increase her fear. You can politely explain that because your dog isn't feeling comfortable, she doesn't want to visit.
- Keep your movements slow and voice calm. If you seem anxious or upset, your dog might become even more afraid.
- If you unexpectedly encounter a person who frightens your dog, focus on calmly and quickly removing your dog from the situation. (See The U-Turn, below, for advice about how to do this.)

The U-Turn Because you might unexpectedly see or meet a person who frightens your dog when the two of you are out and about, it can help to teach her an easy U-Turn. Sometimes dogs can freeze up or lunge and bark when frightened. This easy U-Turn will enable you and your dog to quickly and calmly “get out of Dodge” without worsening your dog's stress by forcing or dragging her with the leash.

You'll need to practice first in a relaxing, familiar place without any scary people around. Then you can try the U-Turn when you're walking outside with your dog. Eventually, you'll be able to use the U-Turn to quickly lead your dog away when you run into a person who frightens her.

1. Put a leash on your dog and take her to a quiet, familiar place. Using a room in your house will work best.
2. Start walking with your dog in a straight line.
3. After three or four steps, say “U-Turn” in an upbeat voice. Then reach down and put a tasty treat right in front of your dog's nose. Turn around and go in the opposite direction, using the treat like a magnet to lead her by the nose along with you. Make sure you don't jerk or pull your dog with her leash. You should be able to guide her movement as she follows the tasty treat. If your dog doesn't readily follow the treat, try using something tastier. Try bits of hot dog, cheese or chicken.
4. After you and your dog have made the U-Turn and walked a couple of steps, release the treat from your fingers and let her eat it.

5. Practice the steps above until your dog quickly whips around to walk in the opposite direction as soon as she hears you say the cue “U-Turn.” Eventually, you won’t have to use the treat on her nose anymore to lead her, but do continue to reward her after the two of you have changed directions and walked a few steps.
6. When your dog becomes a U-Turn pro in your quiet training place, start practicing when the two of you take walks together. Since exciting sights and smells on your walks will distract your dog, you’ll probably need to use a treat on her nose again. Once she gets used to performing her new trick outdoors, you can stop using the treat to guide her—but don’t forget to get out a treat to reward her after the two of you have changed directions and walked a few steps.

Once you’ve taught your dog to turn and walk in the opposite direction with you when you say “U-Turn,” you can start training with familiar people, like family members or friends whom your dog knows and likes. Start practicing with the familiar person about 15 feet away. As your dog gets better at the U-Turn, gradually move closer and closer to the familiar person before turning around to go in the opposite direction. Practice in many different places—but, at this stage, avoid training in locations where your dog is likely to encounter people who might frighten her.

After you practice the U-Turn for a few weeks and your dog seems happy to spin around and walk away with you when she hears you say “U-Turn,” try it out in places where you and your dog might encounter a person who scares her. The first few times you try the U-Turn when your dog sees a scary person, if your dog doesn’t turn toward you immediately, get out a big treat to put on her nose. When she’s turned around with you and you are able to give her the treat, tell her how brave she is and how happy you are that she came with you.

As you practice, keep a close eye on your dog to make sure she’s not experiencing lots of stress or fear. If you see her panting, shaking, drooling, trying to run away, whining, crouching on the ground, growling, or barking and lunging at people, take her home. Next time you practice, keep your dog farther away from the people who frighten her.

After you’ve had a few weeks of planned training sessions practicing the U-Turn when scary people appear, you’re ready to use the skill in real life. The U-Turn will work as a management tool to help you deal as efficiently as possible with unexpected situations. For instance, if you and your dog turn a corner when taking a walk and accidentally run into a person who frightens her, you can use the U-Turn to help her quickly move away from the person. In these situations, stay calm and to keep your voice upbeat—even if your dog barks, lunges or growls. Also deliver very tasty treats as you lead your dog away. *Be sure to keep tasty treats in your pocket whenever you and your dog go out into the world so that you’ll be ready to reward your dog.*

Treatment for Your Dog’s Fear of People

Desensitization and Counterconditioning (DSCC) Desensitization with counterconditioning is a treatment procedure that can help reduce or eliminate a dog’s fear of people. This method focuses on changing a dog’s perception of people from frightening to pleasant by very gradually exposing the dog to the people she fears while teaching her that very good things—rather than scary or painful things—always happen around those people. The good things can include highly desirable food and treats, favorite toys, a favorite game, attention, petting or anything else your dog absolutely loves. Please see our article, [Desensitization and Counterconditioning](#), for a thorough explanation of the purpose and effective use of these treatments.

Desensitization and counterconditioning are complex and can be tricky to carry out. Fear must be avoided or the procedure can backfire and the dog will get more frightened. Because treatment must progress and

change according to the pet's reactions, and because these reactions can be difficult to read and interpret, desensitization and counterconditioning require the guidance of a trained and experienced professional. For help designing and carrying out a desensitization and counterconditioning plan, consult a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist. If you can't find a behaviorist, you can seek help from a Certified Pet Dog Trainer, but be sure that the trainer is qualified to help you. Determine whether she or he has education and experience in the use of desensitization and counterconditioning, since this kind of expertise isn't required for CPDT certification. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Help](#), to locate one of these experts in your area.

Hand targeting Hand targeting, along with desensitization and counterconditioning, could help your fearful dog. Some dogs become uncomfortable or afraid when people stretch out their hands to pet them. If your dog dislikes hands reaching toward her, you can teach her to perform an acceptable behavior, like touching her nose to an outstretched palm when people hold out their hands.

Training your dog to target a hand with her nose can accomplish two beneficial things. First, it can teach her that hands reaching toward her aren't really threatening or frightening. In fact, she'll learn that reaching hands predict really good things, like treats for her! Secondly, hand targeting can give your dog an acceptable behavior to perform when she's in a stressful situation, such as greeting unfamiliar or scary people. Having something to do when frightened can increase your dog's confidence and reduce the likelihood that she'll react fearfully to people.

Initially, only practice hand targeting with familiar people whom your dog already likes and trusts.

1. First, prepare some treats. Choose tasty and soft treats, like jerky, boiled chicken, hot dogs or cheese. Cut the treats into tiny, pea-sized bites. Then take your dog to a quiet place.
2. Teach your dog to touch an outstretched palm. First hold your hand out in front of her, about two inches away from her nose. Your dog will probably move forward to sniff your hand. (If she doesn't, you can jump start your training by rubbing a tasty treat on your palm to make your hand smell interesting.) Wait for your dog to touch your palm with her nose. The instant you feel your dog's nose touch your hand, say "Yes!" and feed your dog a tiny treat *from the other hand*. Then you can repeat the exercise from the beginning. If your dog doesn't touch your palm with her nose, try taking your hand away for a couple of seconds and then presenting it again to grab her attention. You can also try moving your hand back and forth in front of your dog's nose.
3. When your dog touches your hand 9 out of 10 times in a row, you can start to present your hand in different places. Try offering your palm in front of your dog's nose—but a few inches to the right. Then present your palm a few inches to the left. Then try holding it lower, close to the floor. Present your hand 5 to 10 inches away so that your dog has to stand up and move toward it to make contact. Finally, try holding your palm up above your dog's head so that she has to reach up with her nose to touch it. Always remember to say "Yes!" the instant you feel your dog's nose make contact with your hand, and then immediately deliver a tasty treat. If, at any point, your dog seems confused, go back to presenting your palm right in front of her nose, just a few inches away, for a while longer.
4. Repeat steps 1 through 3. Aim for training two or three times a day. Your training sessions don't need to be long—less than 10 minutes is fine. During each training session, present your hand for your dog to target about 15 to 30 times. You can also present your hand just once or twice, right before you do something your dog likes. Present your palm and have your dog touch it with her nose before feeding her dinner, before throwing her favorite ball and before taking her on walks or playing with her outside.
5. After a week or two of practice in quiet, calm places, you can try hand targeting in more distracting locations. If your dog eagerly touches your palm with her nose as soon as you present

your hand in any position, you're ready! (If your dog targets your hand with her nose when you present your hand *less* than 8 out of 10 times on average, you'll need to train in a quiet place for a while longer.) At first, try practicing hand targeting in *slightly* more distracting places, like busier rooms in your house and your backyard. When your dog can touch your hand when you give her the cue at least 8 out of 10 times in a distracting place, practice in a place that's a little more distracting, like at a friend's house or during walks outside with your dog. Over the next few weeks, slowly increase the level of distraction around you during training sessions, making sure that your dog stays successful. If she suddenly seems unable to target your hand when you move to a more distracting location, go back to a less distracting place for a while longer.

6. When your dog consistently targets your hand with her nose in a variety of places, start to incorporate friends and family into your training. Enlist the help of a familiar person whom your dog already knows well and likes. Ask the person to stand a few feet away from your dog and present her or her hand, just like you've been doing. When your dog touches the person's hand with her nose, *you* say, "Yes!" and give your dog a treat. Practice with your friend or family member in different places: your home, friends' homes, outside, and most importantly, on the street during leash walks. You can arrange to have your helper meet you somewhere along your regular route and stop to practice hand targeting with your dog. After your dog practices with one familiar person, you can start to ask other familiar people to help out, too—as long as you're sure that your dog feels comfortable around those people.
7. The next key step is to teach your dog to target the hands of unfamiliar people. If your dog only fears one type of unfamiliar person, like men or people wearing hats, start with unfamiliar people your dog *doesn't* fear. When your dog can happily target the outstretched hands of many non-scary unfamiliar people, then progress to trying hand targeting with people who do make her nervous. If your dog fears all unfamiliar people, start with the most calm, unthreatening unfamiliar people you know. Plan to start training with unfamiliar people in a quiet, calm place where you think your dog will feel most comfortable. *Before* letting your helper meet your dog, explain exactly what you'd like the helper to do. Then bring your dog into the area. Ask your helper to stand or sit about five feet away from your dog and hold out a palm. Make sure your helper starts by holding his or her hand at or below your dog's nose-level—not over your dog's head. Let your dog approach the person on her own. Don't drag your dog up to the person or let the person frighten your dog by moving too close to her. If your dog seems confused at first, help her out. Remind her what to do by holding out your own hand for her to target first. After she targets your hand and gets her treat a few times, your helper can offer his or her palm again. You can also ask a familiar person who's already practiced hand targeting with your dog to join in. Your dog can target your hand first, then the familiar person's hand and then the unfamiliar person's hand.
Important note: If, during a training session, you notice your dog showing signs of fear or stress, like heavy panting, trying to flee or quivering, or if your dog growls or barks, STOP IMMEDIATELY. Please read our article, [Finding Professional Help](#) for information about locating a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB) or a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behavior (Dip ACVB) in your area. If you decide to hire a Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT) because you can't find a behaviorist in your area, be sure to determine whether she or he has professional training and extensive experience in successfully treating fear and aggression, as these treatments are beyond what CPDT certification requires.
8. Arrange for your dog to meet and practice hand targeting with a number of different unfamiliar people. Always make sure you coach helpers in advance so that they know exactly what to do—and exactly what NOT to do. Helpers should not approach quickly or make fast movements, pet your dog on top of her head or make loud noises. When your dog seems comfortable targeting the hands of your helpers, you can start to use hand targeting whenever your dog encounters people she doesn't know. When someone would like to meet your dog, explain that she or he should simply extend a hand and wait for your dog to come up to them. If your dog does

approach the unfamiliar person and touch her or his palm, remember to say “Yes!” and give your dog a treat. *Always have some treats handy when you go on walks or invite people to your home.* If your dog doesn’t approach the person, that’s okay. Just explain that your dog’s feeling too shy to meet the person, and make a mental note to practice hand targeting with familiar helpers a bit more.

Specific Treatment for Inadequate Socialization to People

Puppies experience an important developmental period that lasts from about three weeks to three months of age. This developmental period, limited as it is, is the time when dogs learn about who and what is safe or dangerous in the world. It’s when experiences have the greatest impact on a dog’s future social behavior. Because this window of learning occurs during the time when a puppy is with her mother and growing and exploring, it allows a pup to experience what her mother commonly encounters and what she’ll most likely encounter in her own life. Once the dog matures to adulthood, she’ll be suspicious of things that she didn’t encounter during the learning window. In the wild, this suspicion would help keep her alive. Being domesticated and living with people, however, dogs must meet and enjoy pleasant experiences with many different types of people—both men and women, short people, tall people, stocky people, children, elderly people, people of all races, people with handicaps and people in uniforms. If young pups don’t get this exposure to people, they can sometimes develop fearful behavior as adults, just like dogs in the wild do. *The Ultimate Puppy Toolkit*, available through Premier Pet Products (www.premier.com), provides an excellent, detailed guide for socializing puppies.

In addition to meeting a variety of different people at a young age, dogs need to continue to have pleasant experiences with people throughout their lives. If they don’t, the benefits of early socialization can fade, and they might start to develop fearful reactions to unfamiliar people.

Fears that stem from a lack of exposure to many different people during a puppy’s sensitive developmental period can be hard to resolve. Although you probably won’t be able to *eliminate* your dog’s fearful behavior altogether, you might successfully *reduce* her fearful response to the people she fears through proper treatment. An appropriate treatment plan will focus on creating pleasant experiences for your dog whenever she sees a person who frightens her. For example, right after your dog notices a scary person, you’ll give her treats, play, toys and praise. Carefully planned fear-reduction treatments, such as desensitization and counterconditioning, can help improve both the way your dog feels and the way she behaves when she encounters people. Please see our article, [Desensitization and Counterconditioning](#), for a thorough explanation of the purpose and effective use of these treatments.

Specific Treatment for Genetic Predisposition to Fear People

Some dogs are born with timid personalities. They naturally tend to fear unfamiliar people, even if they’ve been socialized well with many different kinds of people as young puppies. Some of these dogs start to display fearful behavior around strangers at a very young age. Others seem comfortable around new people during the first few months of their lives but then, as they mature, start to act fearfully around people they don’t know. If you think this is the case with your dog, medication, along with desensitization and counterconditioning, might help. (See below for information about medications.) You can also try incorporating confidence-building exercises into your dog’s training routine. Participating in dog sports or breed-relevant activities, such as retrieving or herding, might boost your dog’s confidence. Consider taking an agility or flyball class, teach your dog to play fetch or, if you live with a herding breed, seek out someone who can teach you about herding. These exercises might increase your dog’s comfort level in both familiar and unfamiliar places. Structured games and exercise can help reduce stress. Don’t hesitate to contact a Certified Pet Dog Trainer in your area for group or private classes that can give you and your dog lots of great confidence-building skills to learn and games to play together. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Help](#), to locate a CPDT in your area.

Dogs who seem naturally inclined to develop fearful behavior can be more sensitive to firm discipline, so it's important to avoid the use of verbal and physical punishment.

Specific Treatment for Dogs Who Associate a Traumatic Event with the Presence of People

If your dog fears certain people because of a traumatic experience, desensitization and counterconditioning exercises could help. Although effective, desensitization and counterconditioning are complex and can be tricky to carry out. Fear must be avoided or the procedure will backfire and your dog will become more frightened. Because treatment must progress and change according to the pet's reactions, and because these reactions can be difficult to read and interpret, desensitization and counterconditioning require the guidance of a trained and experienced professional. For help designing and carrying out a desensitization and counterconditioning plan, please read our article, [Finding Professional Help](#), to locate a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist or a qualified Certified Pet Dog Trainer in your area.

Desensitizing and counterconditioning a dog to people she once accepted but now fears is often more successful than desensitizing and counterconditioning the dog to people she has always feared. A sample description (not tailored to your specific dog) of a desensitization and counterconditioning procedure to reduce or eliminate fear of a person whom a dog once accepted follows:

- Put your dog on a leash. Start with the scary person standing very far away. You want your dog to notice the person but still appear relaxed. If your dog looks nervous or fearful or if she attempts to get farther away from the person, you're starting with the person too close. Increase the distance between the scary person and your dog.
- While you and your dog are in the presence of the frightening person (still at a distance), feed your dog a few delicious treats, like small bits of hot dog, chicken or cheese, one at a time.
- Give a steady stream of treats with the person in sight. Then move away and stop giving treats the moment the person's out of your dog's sight. Your goal—over many repetitions of approaching and withdrawing from the scary person—is to teach your dog that the sight of the person predicts your delivery of delicious treats, while the absence of the person makes the treats stop. It might help if you happily say something like “Yippee!” when she notices the scary person. Then you can immediately start feeding her goodies.
- When your dog appears completely relaxed and perhaps even happy with the once-scary person in sight at that distance, gradually, over many training sessions, move the person closer to her. Continue to feed treats generously when the person is in sight, and stop feeding when the person is out of sight.
- Always be careful not to push your dog to approach the scary person too quickly. If, at any point during your treatment exercises, you think your dog looks nervous or upset, go back a step and increase the distance between your dog and the person that frightens her.
- If your dog finds toys highly motivating, you can alternate between giving her treats and playing with her favorite toy. Choose one special toy that the two of you play with only during these exercises, and the rest of the time it is kept in a drawer or cupboard.
- Always end the session on a positive note, meaning that your dog has become at least somewhat more relaxed and happy. Remember not to push your dog too fast or force her to interact with the person she fears.
- Conduct sessions at least three times per week (preferably daily) until your dog seems comfortable with the person close up. At this point, your dog will need regular reminders of the lesson she's learned. Every two to three weeks, expose her to the person at the distance she was last comfortable with and give her a couple of treats or play her favorite game.

Medications

Always consult with a veterinarian before giving your dog any type of medication for a behavior problem.

In conjunction with desensitization and counterconditioning, medication might help reduce your dog's fear and stress. There are many different anti-anxiety medications available for dogs with fear-related behavior problems. If you'd like to explore this option, speak with your veterinarian, a veterinary behaviorist or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist who can work closely with your vet. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Help](#), to locate one of these professionals in your area.

General Precautions

To avoid intensifying your dog's anxiety and increasing her fearful behavior, try to keep her away from people who frighten her. It's fine for her to see a person she fears during treatment sessions because you'll be prepared with treats to help her get over her fear. However, if you and your dog encounter a scary person outside of the controlled treatment context, both of you might be taken by surprise. You may be unprepared to counteract your dog's fear, and as a result, her fear and anxiety might intensify. Try to avoid accidental exposure to scary people. For instance, if your dog is afraid of your neighbor, keep your dog away from your neighbor at all times unless you're having a treatment session. If your dog is afraid of all strangers, cross the street when out walking or turn and walk in a different direction if you see a person your dog doesn't know headed your way.

What NOT to Do

- Do not force your dog to confront her fear by making her look at, approach or interact with a person who frightens her. This practice might actually *increase* your dog's fear and worsen her behavior.
- Do not try to lure your dog closer to people who scare her. Doing this can intensify your dog's fear and might provoke aggressive behavior.
- Do not scold or physically punish your dog for being afraid, even if her response to fear includes barking, growling or displaying other aggressive behavior. Punishing your dog by yelling or physically "correcting" her will merely intensify her fear and distress and could worsen her aggressive behavior as well.
- Do not constantly reassure your dog. You do want her to look to you for safety and security, but it's not helpful to repeatedly pick her up or chant "It's okay, it's okay..." Your dog won't understand what you're saying, and if you sound anxious, you might make her even more upset. Instead, you can calmly praise and reward your dog for confident, relaxed behavior if she offers it on her own.