

Canine Fear

It's 3 o'clock in the morning and you are woken with a loud bang coming from the kitchen. It's dark, you're alone, and you feel the fear coursing through your veins. You grab the baseball bat you keep by your bed and slowly open the door to your bedroom. As you walk up the hallway to the kitchen, you hear more and more noises, like drawers being opened and chairs being moved. You hear someone say something to someone else and...you freeze.

Humans have three instinctive responses to fear. Flight, Freeze, or Fight. When I was 8, I was delivering papers in the dark at 5 a.m. and I thought I saw Bigfoot. I was literally frozen in place for what felt like hours. I couldn't move for about 5 minutes. Or people run. You know those first responders who always run towards the excitement while we're all running away? Or, there are some people who just hold their ground and fight.

Dogs are the same. They have a fight, freeze, or flight response, too. Something that scares them will cause one of these three reactions. This is typically seen when a dog is on a leash.

"I don't understand why he acts like this on leash. He loves dogs. He goes to daycare and plays." Well, Wimpy is dealing with some fear. He can't run away, so he has to act big and scary so that the other dog steers clear. If Wimpy could flee, he'd have more confidence in dealing with the other dog. This reactivity is a form of fear aggression. Or fear reactivity.

Maybelle is a great dog, but when some people come into the house, she growls at them. "She's met Uncle Roy several times, but she growls at him every time he comes over. She's fine after a while, but it's like she's never met him before." Maybelle is afraid of Uncle Roy. Maybe he smells like mothballs. Maybe it's because he's over 6 feet tall and has a beard. Maybe it's because he's always wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap. For whatever reason, Maybelle is afraid. She's warning Uncle Roy to stay away from her until she feels safe.

Dogs go through multiple fear stages in their lives. One of my dogs became petrified of stumps. It took some work to get her past this fear, because, come on - who isn't afraid of stumps? If a dog isn't helped with their fear during this stage, they might be afraid of the object for the rest of their lives.

This is where you, as the human, come in. If you see that your dog is afraid, it's up to you to do something about it. When humans become terrified of something, they see therapists. If your dog is afraid of something, working with a vet, a behaviorist or a trainer is important. Expecting your dog to "snap out of it" or "get over it" or "work it through" is disingenuous. You have to teach your dog what to do in situations that scare him, be compassionate and understanding and, most importantly, nurture the trust that your dog has in you.

You know that a stump isn't going to hurt you or your dog, so you work to help your pup overcome that fear. You also know that Uncle Roy probably won't hurt Maybelle, so you work to help her overcome her fear of Uncle Roy. Sorry, but there's nothing you can do to help me with my fear of Bigfoot.

Written by Sheila of Integral Dog Training in collaboration with Animal Rescue Connection (c) 2022.