



TIMID DOGS

There are no magic formulas or tricks that can be used except for the basic rules that apply to one's own mental state and physical behaviour when attempting to cure any type of problem in a dog.

You need a calm state of mind combined with inner confidence, patience and consistency, the ability to understand the language of animals and dogs specifically. This together with constantly monitoring one's own breathing and emotional state are the only things required to be a competent dog owner/handler. Remember you cannot fake anything in front of an animal, you may think that you can but you will only be fooling yourself.

Of all the behaviour problems that dogs may exhibit the most complex and difficult group is the shy, nervous, fearful, anxious, timid or physically impaired. Not least because generally speaking their behaviour elicits the strongest emotional response from the humans who have to deal with them, thereby reducing their ability to help.

This is because independent of the specific characteristics of individual problems, one of the things required of the handler/ helper/ owner is inner calmness and confidence which is instantly compromised by feeling sorry for or sad about the state of the animal.

The moment that emotional states, whatever they may be, enter the equation the person feeling them will become weaker. The dog will smell this weakness seeing as how all emotion is chemical and you will no longer be able to inspire the confidence that the animal lacks.

Similarly if you cuddle, stroke, pick up or verbally encourage a dog while they are exhibiting unwanted behaviour in an attempt to calm them or show that you care you will be nurturing and encouraging the very thing you are trying to put an end to.

Often timid dogs are misdiagnosed because fear, anxiousness, etc. can lead to aggressive behaviour and yet the problem is not aggression but is actually fear. This happens because nature targets weakness so the dogs that feel vulnerable may have a tendency to try to preempt an attack by launching one first and be mistakenly considered to be aggressive.

When dealing with shy or fearful dogs it is important to make yourself as physically small as possible, to move slowly but without hesitation and sideways on to the animal without looking it in the eye.

As fear and nervousness makes the body tense and a lot of the time they may stand rigid with their backs arched a good long massage along the back bone and above the tail can ease some tension. In the same way that among humans stress will lead to neck shoulder and back pains.

Very often if not always, timid dogs will try to run away or hide from you and the activity being asked of them. It is important that the dog learns to face his fears but in a controlled manner in order that he doesn't become completely flooded with anxiety.

Desensitization and counter-conditioning are great ways to help a dog overcome the frightened emotional and physical responses to people.

Desensitization is exposure to a fear-evoking stimulus (strangers, for example) at a sub-threshold level. A sub-threshold level is far enough away that the dog notices them, but is not upset by them.

Counter-conditioning is presenting a pleasant stimulus (such as roast beef) in the presence of a scary stimulus (such as a stranger). The goal is to use the pleasant stimulus to change the dog's emotional and physiological response to the stranger from fearful to happy and relaxed.

Into action

Here's how desensitization and counter-conditioning might look for a dog who is afraid of strangers:

- Identify what scares your dog - the more specific the better!
- Pick something special to use for a conditioning treat. This is the time to use the best and most wonderful thing your dog can imagine! For many dogs, meat is the best choice: roast beef, hot dogs, chicken breast. For some dogs, a high-value play object or game can be a great option. Make sure that your dog is motivated; if you are using food for the reward, the dog needs to be hungry! If the dog is too stressed to take food that he would normally enjoy, then you are not at a sub-threshold level.
- Figure out the dog's threshold. Consider how close the person is, how many people are present, and what they are doing. Let's say that the dog is comfortable with one or two people at a distance of 30 feet.

- Ask your designated stranger to come into the environment at 30 feet away. Each time the person appears - and your dog notices - start feeding the special treats in a rapid-fire fashion. Spill the food out as fast as your dog can gobble it up.
- When the person leaves the environment, stop feeding the special treats.
- Repeat this exercise until your dog is thrilled - and looking to you for the special treats - each time the stranger appears.
- When your dog is comfortable with the stranger appearing at 30 feet, have him come a little closer, say 28 feet away.
- Repeat this (over several sessions on different days) with the person very gradually moving closer, for as long as it takes for your dog to be comfortable. For dogs with mild fears, it may only take a few sessions before a stranger can walk up and your dog is happy to see them. For dogs with more severe fears, it may take months and lots of repetitions with different people.

Be patient! Effective desensitization and counter-conditioning work is about as exciting as watching paint dry (unless you are a dog trainer and get excited about these things!) Remember that the goal is to work sub-threshold. It is slow and tedious, but the payoff is worth the effort.

Opportunity knocks

In an ideal world, counter-conditioning would always happen in conjunction with desensitization (i.e., exposing the dog to the scary people at a sub-threshold level, when he is relaxed and comfortable). In the real world, however, it may not be possible to keep your dog from seeing strangers or other people who scare him while you are working with him to overcome fears. That's okay. Keep up the counter-conditioning (feeding the treats) every time you see a scary person, even if the scary person is too close and your dog becomes worried.

In fact, for dogs with milder shy or fearful behaviours, you may be able to simply incorporate your counter-conditioning into your daily life. When you take a walk and see a stranger, start feeding treats. When a friendly stranger comes to your home, feed your dog treats in the presence of that person.

With timid dogs one of the most important things to remember is to reward the behaviour that you want and ignore the fearful behaviours that may be exhibited.