



Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Fearful and Shy Dogs

We work with shy and fearful dogs at Homeward Bound on a daily basis. There are many reasons for a dog to be fearful, however, most cases stem from a tragic history or lack of socialization. No matter what the circumstance, these dogs need a special home, one with a new owner that possesses great patience and the capacity to love a dog that may not love you back right away.

To better understand the behavior of a fearful dog, you may need to know the signs:

- Cowers or looks away when approached
- Shakes with fear, pants heavily and drools
- Exhibits submissive urination when petted or spoken to
- Refuses to move in certain situations
- Uncomfortable being approached by other dogs
- May growl, snap or lunge at other dogs
- Aggressive toward children or strangers
- Afraid of new places or objects
- Afraid of all household noises
- Afraid of the leash and will not move when leashed

Understanding the Behavior

It's difficult for us, as humans, to change a behavior; wouldn't it be the same for dogs?

As humans we have therapists to talk to, medications to help and many of us still behave in ways that are inappropriate or unhealthy. If you have ever changed a behavior, such as quitting smoking or drinking or losing weight and exercising more, chances are it was difficult. You had to change more than just the behavior, you had to use self-discipline for a long period of time before you were successful.

This is no different for a dog, it takes time, patience, kindness and consistency before you will see results. Removing a dog from a situation in which he learned inappropriate behaviors and placing him into a good situation in which those behaviors are no longer necessary or desired, isn't enough; the dog has to learn and trust.

What to Do:

- Be patient and have realistic expectations
- Always use an upbeat, happy voice
- Try to lure your dog to come to you with treats
- Enrolling your dog in obedience training helps them gain confidence
- Let the dog come to you for petting
- Take a leash and let him drag it around to get used to it

What to Avoid:

- Yelling or scolding
- Forcing the dog to do anything
- Punishment of any kind
- At first try to avoid any loud noises as the dog is trying to acclimate, then introduce them slowly
- Do not expect too much too soon
- Do not "Flood" the dog. For example, if your dog is afraid of other dogs, don't force him into a pack of dogs to speed up the socialization process; this does not work and may be counter-productive.

The gratification comes the first time your scared dog wags its tail when you speak to it or whines with anticipation when you invite it to go out into the world. It may be slow, but well worth the work!

What can I do for my fearful dog?

1. Understanding what your dog is afraid of and what he can tolerate is key in helping your dog acclimate into your household and into society (*triggers and thresholds*)
2. The next step is to build a trusting relationship by providing a safe environment, letting the dog come to you and not forcing him to give affection. You can use games, such as *Targeting* (see below)
3. Slowly introduce positive training and build your dogs confidence by praising and giving positive reinforcement. Set him up for success by taking small steps toward one goal at a time.
4. Be patient and the rewards will come.

Triggers & Thresholds

Triggers are the things or situations that frighten your dog. Your dog may show varying degrees of fear including dilated pupils, drooling, lowered ears, cowering, fleeing, or even growling or biting. You may want to read up on canine body language to understand the fear indicators; there are many websites and books that can help you learn. Dogs rarely bite without warning. Typically they have gone through a series of behaviors that people do not understand or ignore, that say, "Hey, back off, I'm afraid!"

Begin by understanding what your dog is afraid of and just how afraid he is, the key to beginning the process of helping your dog get over its fears. Some fears may be:

- Afraid of people, all people
- Afraid of men, but not women, or children but not adults.
- Bicycles might send your dog into a panic
- Barking at the coffee grinder makes your dog run under the table.
- Little dogs might not scare them but big dogs do.
- They cower when they see someone in a hat or sunglasses
- Terrified of the leash, a brush, or being groomed
- Afraid of other dogs

Your dog may have a different 'threshold' for each of his triggers. The threshold is the point at which your dog can no longer deal with a situation before reacting in a negative way (with fear or aggression). For example, a new person coming into your house is ok, but if two people come in your dog runs and hides. Your dog may be able to tolerate some of its triggers in some locations but not others.

Understanding what your dog is afraid of and just how afraid it is, is key to beginning the process of helping your dog get over its fears. Remember, until your dog stops feeling bad, or afraid, it won't be able to start feeling good, or unafraid. If your dog must continually deal with things that scare it, its behavior may get worse. You never want your dog to think that the only way it can protect itself is by snapping or biting.

If your dog is already acting aggressively toward people or other dogs limit the exposure to these 'triggers' and then manage the dog and situations closely. If your dog does not growl, snap or bite when it is afraid, it does not mean that he has not met his threshold. Some dogs

“shut down” when overwhelmed by their fears, especially if they cannot escape the situation. Watch his behavior and please **DO NOT put your dog in situations that overwhelm and scare him.** It is your responsibility to protect your fearful dog.

DO NOT punish your dog for its fearful behavior whether it’s peeing on the floor or snarling like Cujo! He will not understand why he is being punished and he may begin to associate punishment with what it fears (“Here comes that crazy kid that shows up and I get-yanked by my collar, sprayed with water, shouted at or grabbed roughly, I am in a bad situation and do not know what to do!”). There is a difference between controlling your dog’s behavior and changing their feelings. You want to change their feelings about the things that scare them, not just control their behavior.

When in doubt, treat your dog like a toddler scared of the horses in the merry-go-round. It doesn't matter that the horses are not real; you'd move the child away and go buy them some cotton candy.

Training

There are a few theories on how to care for and train a fearful dog. At Homeward Bound we believe in love, patience and positive training. We do not believe in forcing any dog into a situation that scares them, this is referred to as “flooding”.

Before you enroll your dog in training, you have to build a positive, trusting relationship. This might mean that you spend the first days, weeks or even months showing your dog that you are safe, fun and his best friend. It does not mean showing your dog who is the ‘boss’ or leader of the pack.

For a fearful dog the typical “Leader of the Pack” philosophy is not appropriate and may cause your dog to become more fearful! Build the relationship, and then build his confidence through praise and positive training. You will not have to work very hard to be their leader, they assume you are already!

Training may be easier for a fearful, unsocialized dog if you have another dog in the household to show them how to interact and what is considered appropriate behavior. Fearful dogs understand other dogs more than they do humans, so they learn and acclimate faster.

Targeting & Games

Helping your dog to learn how to communicate with people is an important step toward becoming a healthy dog. The following two activities are great for training and are especially useful when working with a fearful dog.

The Name Game

Fearful dogs typically feel uncomfortable when people talk to them. Conditioning your dog to feel good when you say his name is important. Start with some extra special treats*, say your dog's name and toss him/her a treat, and repeat over and over.

The treats should be irresistible (beef hotdogs cut into pea-sized pieces usually work). Repeat this exercise several times a day. You want your dog to associate its name with something good. When the dog begins to look at you when you say its name you can add in your "good" so he understands this is what you want.

*Some dogs will be frightened by treats being tossed at them, so keep that in mind when working with your dog.

Hand Targeting

Begin with a pile of extra special treats. Hold one out in the palm of your hand and when the dog takes it use your "good" word to praise him. After six repetitions of this, loosely close your palm around the treat and hold it out to your dog. When he sniffs and moves toward or touches your hand, praise and give them the treat. Repeat this until the dog understands that he needs to touch your hand. Once your dog touches your hand you can then add the cue "touch". Repeat this exercise again several times.

You can move your hand into different positions to get your dog used to having hands appear over its head or next to it. Eventually you can have your friends try and test to see how he does with strangers. This could take months depending on your dog. Reminder: a scared dog may find himself too close to its trigger and bite!

Crate Training: to Crate or not to Crate a Fearful Dog

Some dogs find crates safe, they may like to sleep and eat in it and that is just fine. Some fight it and are afraid and trying to get them to enter is an event! You can slowly get them used to the crate, but it

will take more time than it would for a “normal” dog. Just remember to be very patient.

- Lure them in with a special treat, one they only get when in the crate. If you associate good things with the crate, and not punishment, he will be more inclined to use the crate freely.
- Feed them in the crate with the door open; this will help them get used to the crate.

If you decide to try a crate, move slowly and do not push or force the dog into the crate! Be patient and if he will not have anything to do with a crate try blocking off an area (kitchen for example) that the dog can sleep in and still move around.

Desensitizing

The challenge of working with a fearful dog is to help them learn how to recognize people, sounds, objects or situations that they are afraid of in a more positive way. One of the best techniques is to use ‘classical conditioning’ to create new, positive associations with their fears, or ‘triggers’. Typically, we do this by using food rewards as food can be a powerful resource and reinforcement. Most of these behaviors are thought of as being normal dog behaviors, the list includes:

- eating
- chewing
- grooming
- playing
- exploring
- chasing
- running
- scratching

Working with your dog to perform one these activities in a situation in which the dog is afraid, is rewarding progress! You can begin to change its interpretation from fear to acceptance, changing its world to a less scary place.

Overall, the key is finding the balance between the time your dog may need to move forward and your expectations. The dog will become more comfortable with you in his home environment and then he may be willing to try new things. Based on the trusting relationship you create with your dog, and the time you spend you can make a world of difference to a fearful dog. They are more work and take more time to

train, but they will become a forever loving companion as you show them the world does not have to be a scary place. Remember, the number one rule is, don't rush the dog!

Tools and Sources:

Music to sooth and calm your dog at home and in the car:

<http://www.throughadogsear.com/>

Dog anxiety support: Used for thunderstorms and other noises, separation anxiety, crate and leash training.

<http://www.thundershirt.com/>

Various natural remedies you can find on the web:

Herbal, Happy Trails

T-Touch

Massage

Calmative Herbs, Flower Essence Remedies

Recommended Reading:

The Cautious Canine, Patricia B. McConnell Ph.D.

A Guide to Living with & Training a Fearful Dog, Debbie Jacobs

Sources:

Fearfuldogs.com