

These are all common behavioural problems which may be anxiety-based.

Prevention

Prevention is better than cure when it comes to most behaviour problems and anxiety is no exception. For pet owners, the best way to prevent problems arising is by adequate socialisation of puppies. Repeated positive introductions to all sorts of situations will reduce the chances of anxieties developing in the future. For instance, if every time you encounter an animal control officer, they bring you tasty treats, then chances are your association will be a positive one. If, however, the owner becomes tense on the officer's approach, then a little of the owner's anxiety may be transferred to the pet!

It is almost impossible for animals to experience everything during this short, sensitive period of socialisation, during their first four months of life. For instance, most owners can't recreate a thunderstorm! They can, however, expose their pets to a variety of noises and flashing lights to help them become accustomed to the typical conditions of a storm (see Firework 10 Point Plan). If a dog lives in a female-dominated household, then she should be exposed to males of all personalities and appearances from an early age.

Fear of Fireworks?

10 Point Plan

1. Be prepared. Bring your pets inside or lock them up before the fireworks begin. Once they have started it may be too late.
2. Put your pet in a small room or the laundry, or in a covered crate or cat cage where it will feel safe, especially if you cannot be there.
3. Leave the lights on in the room so the flash of the fireworks is not startling.
4. Turn on the television or radio so that the fireworks blend with a noise the animal is used to.
5. Don't make a fuss. Behave as if fireworks are as common as breathing air. Sitting there looking tense waiting for the next one to go off will only tell your animal it should be frightened. A reassuring pat or a few words are fine – overdoing the attention will only confirm that something abnormal is happening.
6. Provide a big juicy bone or tasty rawhide chews to distract the animal but remember some will be too stressed to eat.
7. Keep the animal confined until daylight so that random fireworks going off well after the event don't affect it.
8. Get young animals used to loud noises. Practice with nervous pets well ahead of time by banging pots together or using party poppers. Use all the pointers given above to help your pets feel secure before you start this process.
9. Make sure that all pets have permanent microchip and/or external identification in case of escape.
10. As a committed animal lover be proactive. When you know a fireworks night is coming up, pop a copy of this list in all the letterboxes in your street.

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Cure

Anxieties can be overcome and phobias treated but this should be done with caution.

Most owners get it wrong and actually reinforce their pet's fears. The small dog who is scared of big dogs is picked up when a large dog approaches, confirming his fears that he needs to be rescued. During a thunderstorm the cat is brought on to the lap to stroke and comfort it. Next time the cat feels even more anxious.

The best reaction owners can have is to ignore the fearful behaviour and reward calm, unstressed behaviour with praise and pats.

A severe fear or phobia should not be ignored, however. Imagine how difficult it is to live with a fear of snakes or a phobia about men, especially if you have to encounter them on a regular basis! The animal needs help. Generally the owner's vet, a behaviourist or an experienced dog trainer will understand the anxiety problem and may help work with it. The veterinary surgeon will often prescribe medication to calm the animal down. This may be taken over several months or immediately before a stressful event. Not all fear-provoking events are easy to predict, however, and so an accompanying behavioural treatment option is usually an effective long-term solution for fears and phobias.

A veterinary behaviourist or animal behaviourist will design a step-by-step treatment program, implemented at the animal's pace. Exposing the animal to the fearful situation can be traumatic and so is generally done in stages and with a lot of patience. Just imagine you had a fear of spiders or snakes and your therapist put you alone in a room full of them!

Many animals with severe anxieties are difficult to live with and sadly can rarely be re-homed.

Role of council

Perhaps the most effective role that council can take is:

- attempt to recognize when anxiety could be an underlying factor causing a behavioural problem;
- alert the owner to this possibility;
- refer for further help;
- be patient with the behavioural problem while being worked on;
- be aware of any potentially stressful situations arising eg community firework displays and have a preventative plan of action or be willing to address the problem later.

With time, patience and expert help, many canine fears and phobias can be overcome and all our pets can live a stress-free life and so can we humans.

Joanne Righetti

Joanne strives to educate, motivate & counsel the general public & professionals on animal behaviour and the human-animal relationship, on the problems and the joys. Joanne understands relationships (specialising in the human-animal kind) and has a Ph.D specialising in Animal Behaviour from the University of New South Wales and a Certificate in TV Presenting. She has her own business dealing with pet, owner & community relationships, education, research and treatment of behaviour problems. This includes acting as a consultant to the NSW Animal Welfare League, co-hosting Pets Music Talk radio show, working with local councils to train staff in animal behaviour and develop information services for the public and pet loss grief counselling to appropriate individuals and organisations.