

**Notes****Don't worry, be happy: Managing anxiety, solving behaviour problems in our pets**

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**Abstract**

What causes some animals to bark excessively, to roam the neighbourhood, to cause damage to property or even to attack approaching people? In some cases, anxiety!

While most companion animals live stress-free lives, certain individuals suffer from anxieties, fears or phobias. These may range from mild whining or crying behaviours to full-scale panic attacks and result in a variety of behavioural problems that owners and society have to deal with.

Most fears and anxieties can be prevented by appropriate socialisation of young animals. Curing existing problems involves understanding animal behaviour and seeking professional help.

**A Dog's Life**

Outwardly most pets appear to have an easy life, most being pampered, well-fed canines or felines living in luxury within our homes. Some individuals develop behavioural problems – aggression, roaming the neighbourhood, barking, destructiveness and often it is concluded that these problems are caused by boredom or over-assertiveness where the animal takes over the family and neighbourhood. In many cases, however, anxiety is the underlying root of the problems.

Anxieties, fears and phobias are actually quite common in our companion animals and solving behavioural problems often requires an understanding of these stress-related conditions.

**Scary Stuff**

Storms, fireworks, sudden noises or an unexpected touch are common triggers of fear in our pet canines. Other dogs may be terrified of children or men, of cats or even inanimate objects such as umbrellas! Cats and pet birds too may fear the unexpected or unknown. If an animal has never encountered a toddler before, can you imagine how scary it could be to find one crawling alongside you, trying to eat your dinner or pull your tail? Chances are next time you saw one you would feel a little anxiety. Even simple procedures around the home like bath time or using a broom can set some animals off on a trembling or drooling episode. Getting into cars or visits to the vet can be terrifying for some animals.

We sensible, rational humans know that there is no danger present but to the animal it is real. The animal actually believes she will be harmed and must try to escape or to attack the frightening stimulus; otherwise her life is in danger.

When these fears become obsessive and persistent, the animal has a phobia.

**Fight or Flight**

When your life is potentially in danger, the best survival strategy is to flee the scene. Most animals will aim to keep away from skateboards or vacuum cleaners if these are their particular fears. When this is not possible, then it may be necessary to put up a fight. A dog bite or attack may well be the result of a fearful dog; a cat scratch the result of a petrified pussycat.

This "Fight or Flight response" occurs as a result of adrenaline surging through the body. Adrenaline prepares the body for action, to run or to defend ourselves. The heart beats faster, breathing speeds up and all other bodily reactions, such as digestion, slow down or cease. This is why it is difficult to get dogs to accept food treats when they are stressed.

A frightened or anxious animal may demonstrate other signs of stress. Trembling, dilated pupils, panting, drooling, sweating through pads, vocalisation such as barking or whining, unusual toileting behaviours and a tense body are all common symptoms of stress. These symptoms do not always signify anxiety so the whole situation must be taken into account before a diagnosis can be made.

Compare the two postures in the Figs 1 and 2 below. Approaching the frightened dog may well result in the dog fleeing or, if unable to escape, attacking.



Fig 1: Frightened canine posture



Fig 2 : Relaxed canine posture

**Is Anxiety a Problem?**

Try asking yourself:

- Could that dog roaming the neighbourhood actually be fleeing from the noise of the thunderstorm or anxiously trying to relocate her owner because she has been left alone;
- Could the cat that's toileting all over the neighbour's garden be anxious at disturbance in his environment;
- If I approach this dog and corner him, could he be fearful and bite me;
- Is the dog's barking cause by separation anxiety when he is left alone?

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.