

Ways to Help Fearful, Stressed and Anxious in any Situation – GO RELAXO! By Maureen Ross, MA, NCC, CPDT-KA, RYT

Often clients will call saying their puppy or dog seems stressed out and anxious in particular situations. My response is, “Good awareness, thanks for that”. Dogs imprint at an early age. They associate individually and contextually to sights, sounds, smells and THINGS! Some dogs are more resilient than others, with a mellow, whatever attitude. Others are not. If something scary has happened in the past, we know today, that dogs can suffer, like we do, from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome). Simply, triggers can set out a chain reaction of anxious behavior. Oddly, it’s a way to cope so respect it.

When a puppy or dog hears a loud thunder, crash, or something unfamiliar happens that they aren’t use too, it matters what we do in response and in the moment. It also matters what WE do if it happens to US – the first step is BREATHE. Our dogs rely on us, so if we come unglued, they can’t possibly RELAX.

Being aware - scanning the area - observing what’s going on around you and your dog, is a proactive way of preventing triggers and behaviors from being reinforced repeatedly. Read on for some helpful tips on how to prevent and cope with fear, and how to change an anxious dog to a relaxo dog.

If you have a dog that is shy, anxious or fearful, you know how challenging it can be. Taking a calm walk can turn into hair-tearing experience you soon want to forget. Our natural, caring tendency, as dog parents (companions) is to want to protect them. Puppies and dogs need to learn self-control, and how to relax in any situation, by relying on you before reacting, panicking or collapsing.

Here are some ways to prevent, manage, and encourage happy, healthy, confident dogs in a variety of situations excerpted from *Awareness Centered Training - ACT*.

- 1. Always respect your dog’s stress. Be observant, monitoring for signs of stress before it happens.** Dogs are masters of body language, provided they have been allowed to use them in a variety of situations. If not, that’s okay. Stress signals can be noticed like lip licking, yawning, turning away, lying down - and trying to pull you in another direction. If you’re not sure what your dog’s signals are, have someone videotape your dog and/or watch for you (teamwork). Play it back, in slow motion if possible, and watch for signals when you dog is becoming anxious. Noticing when this begins for our dog gives you an advantage of changing anxiety into something more positive.
- 2. Triggers and Signals:** Dogs communicate with body language and vocalization (whining, barking). Watch for these, and minimize these triggers by taking a step back and a different approach. Switching it up, changing the situations, gives the dog a chance to shake off the stress. Be calm, and respect the dog’s ***Spatial Bubble*** (available at *Dog Talk Media/Learning Zone*) with regards to too many people at once and SPOOKY THINGS. REWARD calm behavior.
- 3. Counter-Conditioning means pairing something positive (safe) with something negative (not safe to the dog). Desensitization means exposing your dog to the scary thing in a gradual, systematic way.** I ask my clients the same thing you see on pain charts in hospital rooms. How scary is this for you and your dog on a scale of 1 – 10. Imagine the scariest thing for you. Is it drowning, burning, getting lost in a foreign country, getting mugged or sick? It’s like this for dogs too, but they process it differently. They go into fight or flight mode, or crash. Desensitization is incrementally introducing the dog to scary things, from a distance, while rewarding calm behavior with a healthy treats or massage. This will help to create confidence and reduce the “trigger” reaction to unfamiliar things.



4. **Scan and Switch is in Awareness Centered Training – ACT.** We need to train ourselves to scan areas we walk or take our dogs. Training and working with therapy dogs teams is enriching. The goal is to desensitize puppies/dogs to sights, sounds and smells, while relying on us to remain calm. It isn't always easy. We teach teams to scan the area within 10-feet. Watch your dog. What is s/he's body language telling you? If you walk your dog on the left, it may be safer for the dog on the right – so switch, having the dog go behind you, not in front of you - to the other side. Even that small amount of space (you in-between) helps to relieve anxiety.
5. **Never force your dog to confront something spooky (trigger)** that will overwhelm them or make them even more reactive. Your dog trusts you to make safe decisions. Deciding on increasing space with, and for your dog, is the respectful thing to do. Again, if you were afraid of drowning, would you want someone to take you to the middle of the lake - and boot you in - without a life preserver, and then wave as they row back to shore? If I survived, that person would get punched, and it would be unlikely I would trust them again in a boat - or any other scary situation.
6. **Does your dog have a specific fear trigger?** Good, at least you are aware. When you haven't a clue, it's difficult - and frustrating to know where to begin. Try using something positive, comforting, and healthy. Pair it with that scary thing (food, toy, soft voice). For example, a fear of people might bring on an emotional response from your dog (lunging, barking, and pulling in the opposite direction). Honor this. **Redirect and move away. Re-focus** your dog to you and sit while giving a healthy flow of treats like salmon bits or whatever your dog likes. The goal is to condition a positive connection / emotional response so that your dog will associate a good feeling when seeing new people or in new environments. Same for noises! At a distance, first breathe, be calm, and re-focus your dog to you (safe place) and a sit. Give a healthy reward.
7. **Strangers are a common fear/anxiety trigger.** Allow your dog the privilege to think and make decisions in these situations. Forcing them to meet / greet or do something while anxious is counter-productive. Remember being booted into the lake. Review the body language meet/greet charts – *Dog Talk / Learning Zone*. Have your dog sit. Have a person go to the side slowly rather than loom over the dog while banging their heads (so called petting). Know your dog! What DO they enjoy, a chest rub? Have someone slowly give them a few treats, and then attempt a chest rub. The dog will let you know. **Avert eyes to the side – rather than direct eye contact.** This can be threatening for a dog, who in the past, may have been corrected harshly. People can be lunatics even with good meaning – **SWITCH your dog the other side or STAND in front of you dog to prevent direct and quick approaches. Tell them. You have a choice to do what's best (and safe) for you and your dog.**
8. **If the triggers and fear are as simple as building confidence, habituation, socialization and manners (SAM) and training help.** For example, all dogs benefit from socialization and manners (SAM) is a dosage appropriate for them as individuals. An under-socialized, mildly insecure dog can benefit from short walks with a more confident dog, well-mannered dog. If the dogs are comfortable with each, ask a friend to join you. The confident dog can role-model doggy style while you slowly and easily **turn your anxious dog into relaxo dog.**

Enjoy the Journey breathing in deeply nose-to-navel.

