

How to Respond to Your Fearful Dog

When your dog shows fear, do you know how to help? Take our quiz to find out.

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While you may enjoy the sound of a thunderstorm or the glimmer of fireworks, your dog may be hiding under a table, shaking with fear. Most dogs are afraid of something; fireworks, thunder, or even an object in an unexpected place can spook a dog.

When your dog is fearful, how do you help? Take our quiz to see how your methods match up with the experts'.

1. On walks, your dog is skittish around garbage trucks, and frantically pulls you when one approaches. You:
 - a) Plan walks around the days and times that the garbage collection occurs.
 - b) Step back from the street, place your dog in a Sit, and focus his attention on you while the truck passes.
 - c) Talk to your dog in soothing words, petting him while the truck approaches.

Best response: (b) Teach your dog to focus on you and follow your calm example. Avoidance does not help him conquer his fear, and soothing him only reinforces his fear.

2. During a short but violent thunderstorm your dog hides in a closet, nervously chews shoes, and shakes uncontrollably. You:
 - a) Move into the closet with him. Why should he suffer alone?
 - b) Put him on leash, calmly Heel him out of the closet, and keep him by your side until the storm subsides.
 - c) Correct his insecurity with a sharp "No!"

Best response: (b) It's OK for a dog to seek a safe space in a storm, but it's never OK for a dog to engage in destructive behavior.

3. Your dog panics when he approaches a bridge and refuses to cross. You:
 - a) Find creative routes that bypass the bridge.
 - b) Brace yourself and pull him across the bridge.
 - c) Briskly lead him by your side onto the bridge, giving him small treats after crossing increments of the bridge.

Best response: (c) Lead by example and encourage bravery with praise and treats.

4. Each time you take out the vacuum, your dog barks and runs in anxious circles. You:
 - a) Turn on the vacuum for short periods of time, keeping the dog on his leash near you, to desensitize him to the noise.
 - b) Ask a family member to walk him while you vacuum.
 - c) Push the vacuum toward him to show that it won't hurt him.

Best response: (a) Desensitization takes time, but is worth the effort. Patience is key; never try to push fearful a stimulus on a dog too quickly or too dramatically.

5. Your neighbors are lighting fireworks for a holiday. Your dog whines and repeatedly jumps up on you and others. You:
 - a) Pick him up or sit on the floor to comfort him.
 - b) Play music and create an upbeat commotion in the house to distract him.
 - c) Put the dog in a Down-stay, or if he cannot hold a Down-stay, put him in his crate until the fireworks are over.

Best response: (c) Fearful behavior such as jumping can be controlled with obedience training. Don't reinforce his fears by



rewarding him with affection, and don't overwhelm him in an attempt to provide distraction. Instead, provide him with a quiet place to settle and wait until the fireworks are over.

Thanks to Lara Stonesifer, trainer and owner of Lara's Canine Solutions in Texas, for her input for this article.

For more information about understanding your dog's fears, check out the June 2008 issue of DOG FANCY.