

Is Your Dog Always Scared or Fearful?

Learn how to recondition frightened dogs.

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It's fair to say that Rusty was traumatized. On September 11, 2001, the border-collie mix's owner dropped him off at doggie day care, just blocks from the World Trade Center.

Everyone, including Rusty, knows what happened that day. He saw the panicked faces, heard the relentless sirens, and sat waiting for an owner who would never return.

The dog's worldlike ours was turned upside down, says Sarah Wilson, an author and trainer in Gardiner, N.Y., who fostered Rusty until he found a new home. He came to us beside himself, clearly disoriented and needy.

Rusty's behavior was understandable and correctable: By putting him on a very predictable routine, as well as a rigorous exercise schedule, Wilson succeeded in giving structure and meaning to his world.

Now a well-adjusted dog living with his new owner in Florida, Rusty is proof that trauma in our animals can be successfully dealt with if you have the right approach.

Don't be an enabler. Constant reassurance often has the opposite effect, signaling that there really is something to be worried about. Always act the way you want your dog to react, Wilson advises. And look at your own feelings: It's possible that a person may deal with his or her own trauma through empathy with their pet, Wilson adds. Sort of I'm all better from the car accident, but Spot, well, he's a mess.'

Proceed in stages. With dogs that are afraid of specific things—the sound of sirens, or getting into a car—you need to work on a combination of slowly desensitizing and counter-conditioning, explains Pia Silvani, director of pet training and behavioral counseling at St. Hubert's Animal Welfare Center in Madison, N.J. Desensitizing means gradually bringing the dog closer to the thing that frightens him; counter-conditioning means turning it into a positive experience with play or treats.

Quit while you're ahead. Easier said than done. But the goal of each training session is to end on a positive note. If you push for just one more success, you might undo all the progress you've made so far.

Be the leader. The better your relationship with your dog, the more he will trust you and the more willing he will be to take risks and face his fears. You can reinforce the perception of yourself as a benevolent leader by asking the dog to work for any rewards that he gets, including meals.

Re-evaluate your definition of trauma. Some traumas are less obvious, such as a contentious divorce. But just because an animal doesn't intellectually know what's going on, doesn't mean he's not affected by it.