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General Anxiety

There is a spectrum of confidence levels that individual dogs can fall along; from happy dogs who fear nothing to terrified dogs who jump at any noise. For anxious animals, normal day occurrences or experiences that we find “normal” or “harmless” can appear to them to be deadly threats or terrifying experiences. Failing to address the underlying anxiety will heighten their stress but can also lead to destructive, obnoxious or even aggressive behaviour. Luckily, there are things you can do to help manage your dog’s anxiety. Some animals will be fine with just some of the management changes suggested here while others will need medication for them to respond “normally” to a given situation. This handout will go over some home management and training you can try to use to help your anxious animal. If this does not work or if your animal is aggressive, consult your regular veterinarian. Medication may be required and they may recommend a behaviour consult with Dr Josh Cousins.

• **Structure Your Relationship With Your Animal**

- Animals have very little control over their lives and anxiety is worsened when an animal is unable to predict what will happen in their environment or what people will do when they interact with them. Creating structured routines and predictable interactions can help create calm and relaxed behaviour as it leads to better communication between dogs and people.
- Try to structure your animal’s day in a predictable routine. Ideally, this should be about the same everyday. Consistent routine creates predictability which helps an animal know where you will be and where they need to be.
 - If work shifts or other things interfere with the routine, do your best to maintain the routine where you can.
 - E.g. If your working hours vary a lot, try to start a consistent routine for whenever you do wake up, when you leave for work, when you arrive home etc.
- Create clear and predictable cues when people interact with your dog. There should be distinct cues that tell your dog what you’re about to do (e.g. showing them the brush before grooming, asking them to sit before accepting attention etc). This teaches them what people expect of them and what people want to do with them.

- To start, choose a command or commands that your animal knows very well (such as sit, lie down, give a paw etc). Whenever your animal wants access to a privilege (such as going outside, grooming, cuddles, before they're fed etc) they should be asked to perform this.
- Be sure to reward them if they perform these actions without needing you to ask them.
- This teaches your animal not only how to politely ask for what they want, but also tells them what you are intending to do with them which can greatly decrease anxiety.
- Do not use punishment for poor behaviour. This will likely increase their anxiety, leading to worse behaviour and even aggression. Punishment can also be a form of attention which can actually re-enforce problem behaviours.
- Instead of using punishment, attention seeking behaviour (such as barking, whining or pawing) should be ignored and attention given when they are showing calm and relaxed behavior. Teaching them polite ways of getting attention (such as sitting) will help encourage them to use polite commands when they want attention.
- Set aside times after play, training or exercise where you ignore your dog. This will help encourage self-play, exploration and being comfortable without your attention.
- Be sure that everyone in the house follows the training rules you create. Inconsistent training is much less likely to work.

● Tranquility Training

- Just as energetic behaviors (such as agility or fetch) can be taught on command, so can calm and relaxed behaviors.
- To begin with, choose a mat or blanket to use for training. Have your dog come over and sit on the mat for a reward. Ask them to perform calm and relaxed behavior (such as quietly sitting, calmly laying down etc) and calmly reward them for doing so. These sessions should be short (5-10min) and frequent (several times a day).
- Training on the mat/blanket allows the animal to associate it with calm and relaxed behaviour. The mat can also be moved around the house to train in different areas.
- When your animal is beginning to show signs of stress or anxiety, they should be redirected towards the mat and engaged in a session of tranquility training. Over time, they may go to this spot themselves when they are feeling anxious to self-soothe (including when you are not home)

● Desensitization and Counterconditioning

- This is a cornerstone of training reactive dogs and is all about training them to be comfortable with things they find scary.
- Desensitization is where we gradually increase the intensity of the scary stimulus (starting at a very low level) so that we can build their tolerance. Counterconditioning

is where we pair the negative stimulus with something positive (like treats, attention, games etc). It is important to do both of them together for the best results.

- First, identify your animal's triggers. These are objects, people or situations that trigger their anxiety (e.g. vacuum cleaners, men with beards, delivery people, the vet clinic)
- Next identify rewards that your animal enjoys. Often it is food, but some dogs respond much better to attention or playing a game. Whatever you choose, try to find the thing that is most enjoyable to them. Giving this reward out only during training exercises can make it even more motivating.
- For the desensitization training, you want to find a level of stimulation where your dog realizes the trigger is there but is not showing signs of stress (lip-licking, restless, barking, unable to follow commands etc).
 - For the dog with a vacuum phobia, this may be just where the vacuum is out, unplugged and about 10 feet away.
 - For the dog who is reactive to other dogs on a leash, this may involve having a friend walk their dog on the other side of the street or a large field
 - For the dog who is scared of men with beards, this may involve having a bearded friend sit outside on the deck or be 50 ft away in the park.
- For counterconditioning training, you will be pairing the arrival of the low-intensity trigger with a positive reward. When the trigger leaves, the reward stops as well.
 - For the dog with a vacuum phobia, as soon as the vacuum comes out and she notices it, she gets lots of attention. Once the vacuum is out of her sight, she gets ignored (for the training session). Repeat.
 - For the dog who is reactive to other dogs on a leash, this may involve playing a game of tug of war as the dog walks by on the other side of the street, stopping the game when the dog is gone. Repeat.
 - For the dog who is scared of men with beards, this may involve having the bearded friend enter the area and gently toss treats to the dog while still ignoring him. When the friend leaves the area, the treats stop. Repeat.
- It is important to reward AFTER your dog has noticed the trigger and stop rewarding AFTER your dog notices the trigger is gone. This order is important as it teaches your dog that it is the trigger that predicts the presence or absence of rewards.
- Practice for several sessions before you try increasing the intensity of the trigger. When you do increase the intensity, only increase it by a small amount. If they handle the new intensity well, practice it for several sessions before trying to increase it again.
 - For the dog with a vacuum phobia, you may try turning the vacuum on for a brief second and then rewarding immediately after.
 - For the dog who is reactive to other dogs on a leash, you could have the dog walk a little bit closer but still on the other side of the street (maybe just off the curb).

- For the dog who is scared of men with beards, you could decrease the distance between them and the dog by 1 foot.
- If your dog becomes too anxious with the new transition, reduce the intensity and practice at this reduced level until they are very comfortable. Then you can attempt to increase it again.
- This goal of this training is to gradually increase the intensity of the trigger while pairing it with positive rewards so that the animal learns that the trigger (that used to predict something scary) actually predicts rewards. The end goal would be to have them ignore the trigger and focus on you instead for their rewards (allowing the trigger to come and go without incident).
- Depending on your dog's reactivity, the entire process could take weeks or months. The important thing is to not rush the process as rushing it can actually worsen their fears and anxieties.

These training methods are an excellent starting place for animals who are struggling with anxiety or fear (especially if you can identify what their triggers are). If you are finding that training alone is not enough, your veterinarian may suggest anti-anxiety medication to help, especially if your animal is anxious much of the time. If attempts at these training sessions do not work or if there are other medical or behavioural issues that complicate the issue, a behavioural consult with Dr. Cousins may be suggested. Talk to your regular veterinarian if a consult is something you would like to learn more about.