A
fraid? Everyone knows what it feels like. We've all been there at one point. Whether it's dropping 100 feet in the air after hitting a pocket of turbulence, standing on stage speaking to 500 people, or stepping into a snake pit. We all feel it differently, depending on the situation. But how do dogs feel fear and can they "get over it?" We'll never really know how they "feel" it, but fear-related problems can often be treated with great success. However, if the triggers are not identified and you attempt the "he'll get over it" treatment plan, the problem can be exacerbated.

Fear is a response to something in the environment that the dog perceives as threatening. It has physiological, emotional, and behavioral components. Fears can result from a genetic predisposition, an early trauma, lack of early socialization, or a combination of all three.

The level of fear varies according to the situation, the dog's genetic makeup, and your dog's past history.

There are varying degrees of fear as well, from mild anxiety to extreme phobias. Anxiety is the anticipation of a danger or threat, and can be associated with many different types of triggers (possibly unknown to you and not clearly visible). For example, some dogs might become anxious when the barometric pressure begins to drop, when an owner picks up her keys to leave in the morning, or when family members begin to have a heated debate that typically results in arguments. I've seen anxious dogs compulsively lick their paws to the point of discoloration, bite their nails to the point of bleeding, and gnaw and lick at themselves causing lick granulomas.

Phobic behaviors (usually associated with thunder, loud noises, separation) are typically out of proportion to the situation. For example, when a dog is fearful (not phobic) of something (a person, an object, another dog, children, etc.) the dog has some options. He can avoid what is frightening him by running away or, if on a lead without an escape, he may bark and lunge in an attempt to keep what has frightened him at bay. When a dog is exhibiting a phobic behavior, he typically cannot function and may actually do harm to himself or his surroundings (self-mutilate, claw or chew his way out of a crate, scratch or bite at door moldings or walls to escape). Basically, when the dog is exhibiting a phobic behavior, he is in a panicked state.

The following are some common statements made by owners, which are misconceptions. These might help you better understand why your frightened friend is reacting the way he is.

- "He'll grow out of it." Dogs do not grow out of their fears as they age. They sometimes can habituate to them (stop responding since after repeated exposure, it no longer has any effect on them). This can occur with mild fears.

- "He must have been mistreated." While this might be true, it typically is not. Dogs who have not been well-socialized can exhibit behaviors like cowering, ducking, or backing away when someone attempts to pet him. On the surface, this appears as if the dog was mistreated. He may not have been socialized. Socialization means the dog is taken to a variety of places and has pleasant experiences.

- "It must be as a result of trauma." Some dogs are innately predisposed to be afraid of certain stimulus, like thunder, for example. There need not be any early trauma related to this.

- "Punish him so he stops this silly behavior." Punishing a fearful dog for behaviors you find inappropriate (i.e. growling or lunging at people) will NOT help. If anything, it does more harm than good. If you punish your dog for growling because he is afraid, he will probably stop growling, but it won't change his emotional state.

- "He's mad at us for leaving him alone all day." If your dog is anxious about being left alone and destroys your house as a result, only to be punished hours later when you return home, you will just increase his anxiety level. He will make absolutely no connection with the act of destruction and your punishment.

- "Don't pet him when he is afraid or you will reinforce his fears." I, for many years, believed this as well until I gave it some thought and decided to discuss it with my colleagues. Think of it this way if I were afraid to fly on planes, a soft touch or hug from my husband certainly would not reinforce my fear. If anything, it might help me relax knowing I had a friend to help me through it.

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The treatment of fear does not necessarily require knowledge of how or why the fear developed in the first place. This may help you feel better if you have been concerned about not knowing your dog's past history. Treatment, though, DOES require identifying what triggers the fearful or phobic behavior.

For treatment to be successful, your dog must have the fear-related stimulus presented to him without feeling fearful. For example, if your dog is fearful of other dogs, taking him to a dog park with 50 dogs running loose might not be the first option. Slowly exposing him to one social dog at a time to help him relax around dogs should be the first step. We use this method of training in our Feisty Fidos course. We attempt to help the dogs relax through massage. Other dogs are kept at a distance. Gradually, we bring the dogs closer and closer to each other, always making sure they are as relaxed as possible, with the ultimate goal of saying hello and exhibiting good canine etiquette as opposed to barking, growling, lunging, and carrymg on.

As you can see, dealing with fearful dogs can be quite complex, especially when a dog is exhibiting phobic behaviors. Sometimes the fears may also involve physiological causes, or are so extreme that they may require the use of medication. I highly recommend that you speak to a professional in the field to assist you in helping your companion relax and enjoy life.