

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Defining anxiety
- » Considering your dog's worldview
- » Identifying your dog's triggers

Chapter **1**

Understanding Anxiety in Dogs

More than anything, dogs want to feel safe. However, many dogs with anxiety experience life as a series of unpredictable events and startling interruptions, leaving them feeling stressed and unsure. The good news is that you can help unpack your dog's fears and help them learn to enjoy life.

It can be difficult to witness your dog struggling with anxiety, and you can't reason with them or validate their emotions as you can a person. Being routinely anxious takes an emotional toll, whether your dog dreads abandonment, is sensitive to noise, weather, or other sensory stimulation, or views other people and dogs as threatening.

Understanding the similarities between human and dog anxiety will help you appreciate your dog's struggles. Recognizing how your dog comprehends their circumstances and communicates stress will help you guide their rehabilitation with empathy and kindness.

Working through your dog's anxiety is more than training them to make better choices and self-soothe once their anxiety is triggered. The initial goal is to build their general confidence and joy

for living. By inspiring fun and happiness through shared interactions, games, and lessons, you can help your dog prioritize your relationship and look to you before they react.



WARNING

Punishment and violence have no part in this process and will only intensify your dog's anxiety. Although you may feel frustrated at times, it's important not to take it out on your dog.

Recognizing Anxiety in Your Dog

All of us can relate to anxiety. Whether you or someone you love receives bad news, experiences financial insecurity, or endures the butterflies before starting a new job, we have all felt it. Coping with anxiety is something we recognize and identify, even at an early age. Many people have a distinct formula for dealing with our anxiety, things like talking to a friend or therapist, going for a walk, or deep breathing. Some people even download an app!

Dogs aren't so lucky. In fact, with limited freedom or ability to express themselves, dogs vent their stress in ways we sometimes deem unacceptable, such as barking, chewing, eliminating, or nipping. Left on their own or unattended, they can suffer greatly.

Unlike people, dogs can't explain unpredictable events, so their tension builds up. Unless you step in and help your dog desensitize triggering events, they will be left with a lot of unresolved triggers and phobias.



REMEMBER

Your dog doesn't identify stress as a separate emotion. When they feel anxiety, it affects their whole being. While there are things they can do to calm themselves, such as run away, dig, or hide, modern dogs often have little agency over their actions and the freedom to choose their own path.

The great disconnect

Your dog doesn't categorize behavior as good or bad. Even for us, right or wrong is often inconsistent; it can be different from house to house, culture to culture, and even person to person. Many couples differ in opinions regarding greeting manners and

play. From your dog's perspective, their behavior is a moment-to-moment decision that is more dependent on what alleviates their anxiety or pain. Here are a few examples:

- » When left alone, a dog might tear the house apart or howl for hours — not to punish you for leaving, but because they physically implode when finding themselves alone. This is known as *separation anxiety*.
- » If you can't find your dog before leaving for work or they dig their heels in as you try to get them in the crate, they are not trying to derail your schedule. Many dogs have *containment anxiety* and become visibly upset when forced into small, contained spaces.
- » Dogs don't growl at strangers or other dogs because they're mean; they do so because they're afraid and unable to distance themselves. Dogs with *social anxiety* are often unsure of a strange person, another dog, or of children.
- » When some dogs sense a storm or hear a loud noise, they become terrified. They hide and run away to soothe their distress, not to derail your schedule or plans. This is an example of a *sensory-sensitive* dog.
- » When dogs react to other dogs on leash or from the safety of an enclosure, they are generally afraid and use their behavior to urge the oncoming dog away.

Understand anxiety

Many words describe the range of intensely fearful emotions dogs experience. While these terms might seem interchangeable, it's important to explore the differences before you can get handle on your dog's issues:

- » **Anxiety:** Dogs experience anxiety when they anticipate a future threat or feel uneasy about something that isn't immediately present. This can manifest as restlessness, excessive barking, or destructive behavior. Unlike fear, which is a response to an immediate threat, anxiety is more about the anticipation of possible dangers.

- » **Fear:** Dogs feel fear when they perceive a real or imagined threat in their environment. This might be triggered by routine events or specific stimuli, such as fireworks, a balloon, or a person wearing a hat. While fear is a normal survival instinct, it can become problematic due to a lack of socialization or a learned response. Fortunately, dogs of every age can develop more positive associations through gradual exposure, a process known as *counterconditioning*.
- » **Panic:** When a stressful event is pronounced and inescapable, a dog may develop a panicked response. For example, Jasper, a terrier mix, was fine being left alone in his crate until a smoke alarm went off and fire trucks arrived. Now Jasper panics whenever he hears sirens and is confined.
- » **Phobia:** When dogs have a chronic fear of an unavoidable noise, situation, or traumatic experience that leads to a PTSD-like response, phobic reactions can evolve. Examples include being left alone, experiencing trauma, hearing thunderstorms, and being confined on a leash. Dogs with phobias often become sensitized to related events, such as the sound of rain paired with thunderstorms, or be crated before isolation. For some dogs, similar-sounding events on the radio or TV can also trigger panic.
- » **Aggression:** Dog aggression is a response to perceived threats or stressors. It can result from fear, anxiety, or frustration. Aggressive behaviors can include growling, barking, lunging, and biting. Dog aggression is often a way of trying to protect themselves or their territory.



TIP

Other words I use to represent different levels of anxiety include distress, dread, alarm, caution, and stress.

Your dog's anxiety falls into one of two camps:

- » **Generalized:** Dogs with generalized anxiety are constantly stressed by any number of sensory stimulations, which interferes with their everyday lives and, by association, your life.
- » **Episodic (situational):** These dogs live a relatively stress-free existence until a specific event occurs, such as a thunderstorm, a vacuum, and so on.

KNOWING WHAT ANXIETY IS AND ISN'T

Not all dogs who act up have anxiety. Sometimes, what might seem like anxiety is actually a response to excitement, frustration, age, pain, or illness.

While dogs can't explain their feelings in English, they express them constantly through body postures and subtle interactions. A dog experiencing anxiety shows their stress in various ways, including pacing, whining, lip licking, panting, and soliciting attention. Chapter 2 takes a closer look at dog communication and covers how they express their emotional states.

Recognize your role in their anxiety

Nobody intends to reinforce their dog's anxiety or maladaptive habits. Too often, however, we do just that. The message often gets lost in translation when trying to reassure a dog. Consider these examples:

- » When out for a walk, do you retreat from other dogs, people, and situations that frighten your dog, or do you tighten your hold on the leash, drag your dog toward what they're trying to avoid, or stand still?
- » When you come home to a frenzied dog or a destroyed household, do you stay calm, or do you get frustrated or angry with your dog?
- » When your dog barks or whines incessantly or paws you repeatedly for your attention, do you politely redirect them, or do you give in to their demands?



REMEMBER

Often, our reassurances reinforce our dog's stress. How you'd naturally reassure a friend having a meltdown or panic attack differs from how you should reassure a dog or puppy.

The good news is anxiety isn't a life sentence. Your dog can make more positive associations and learn better coping skills with your guidance and the information in this book. As they become more emotionally stable, your dog will be more confident and relaxed, even in formerly unnerving situations. One of your first goals is to identify what's causing your dog's anxiety and why.

Understanding Why Some Dogs “Misbehave”

Your dog doesn't love their anxiety any more than you do. When fear transforms a moment, their body floods with adrenaline, giving them a jolt of energy to escape or fend off a threat. Even though *you know* they're safe, your dog might not see it the same way. If your dog feels trapped, they'll become frantic and can't be persuaded with reassurances or food. If they are scared, they'll want to flee. Anxious energy is like steam in a pressure cooker, which eventually needs to be released. Although you may not see steam coming from your dog's ears, your dog may run away, bark, or even fight to defend themselves. When left alone, your dog may chew your couch, eliminate inappropriately, or claw at the door frame.



REMEMBER

It's easy to get angry when your dog acts uncontrollably. But remember your dog's not being spiteful; they have no control over their stress reactions. When they get startled, they disconnect from reality. Your frustration can further their emotional dysregulation.



FUN FACT

Dogs learn to recognize our emotions based on our body language and tone of voice. I know it's frustrating to witness your dog's destruction or endure their frantic attempts to pull away or climb on you for attention, but the only way to help your dog is to stay calm and control yourself. You must model the behavior you want them to mirror in order to change your dog's behavior.



WARNING

If you feel overwhelmed, find supportive help beyond these pages. Whether you hire a personal trainer or behavior specialist, ensure they're qualified to treat anxiety. If you're considering supplements or prescription medications to help your dog, you'll find more information in Chapter 5.

Exploring the Roots of Anxiety

To understand the nature of your dog's anxiety, consider our long history with their species. Back when we were cave dwellers, dogs hung around the perimeters and ate our scraps. It was a symbiotic relationship that worked well. Dogs got free food, and in turn, they protected the campsite from other predators.

As we diversified and expanded around the globe, dogs joyfully adapted to our demands and the changing lifestyle. Over the years, dogs endured our selective breeding practices to hone skills like herding and hunting, often resulting in intense physical modification.

When natural behaviors become undesirable

Everything went along hunky dory, at least for a while. For thousands of years, dogs continued to enjoy their free-range lifestyle, hunting prey and maintaining their own schedules. However, as our population ballooned, we built cities, suburbs, and transportation routes. Our beloved dogs were suddenly at risk. Leash laws were enacted to restrict dogs from roaming, and most of their former skills were rendered obsolete. They were brought inside to live among us, and dogs entered a new phase of expectations and reality as intimate members of our immediate family.

Nowadays, many dogs live a fishbowl-like existence, looking out at the world rather than participating in it. Dogs are experiencing an identity crisis! Lacking outlets for their energy and curiosity, we reprimanded them for behaviors they were bred to do. Watchdogs are admonished for barking at passersby, retrievers for carrying the wrong thing, terriers are scolded for digging, and herding dogs for chasing other pets and children. Without enrichment, these highly social, intelligent, and energetic species suffer in ways we cannot imagine.

The “fur baby” paradox

It's common these days for people to think of their dog like one of their children. It's not hard to understand why: We love them like babies, and they demand a similar level of care and attention. Throughout this book, I draw on similarities between dogs and children, as it can be helpful to apply some parenting techniques to dogs. Consider these similarities:

- » Both thrive best with structure, routine, boundaries, and unconditional love.
- » They have similar needs: to eat, drink, sleep, play, and potty.
- » Both act out when overtired or have unmet needs. Puppies get nippy, however, whereas kids cry.

- » Both lack impulse control and emotional regulation. They both need a good model to develop these skills and express emotions properly.

However, it's important to remember that our dogs are *not* people. They are beautifully unique. A primary difference is their brain size, which is about 1/20th of ours. Their head space mostly comprises sensory neurons, enabling them to interpret sound, sights, and smells in unfathomable ways, despite their limited cognitive ability. Whereas our lives are devoted to deep thoughts and postulations, our dogs' lives are committed to sensory interpretation.



FUN FACT

Did you know that dogs can perceive the squeak of a mouse under your floorboard, identify your car's arrival before it turns in the driveway, and sense weather events due to slight changes in barometric pressure? Their sense of smell is so powerful they can identify illnesses like cancer and COVID-19, find people buried beneath the rubble, and even sense our mood fluctuations by whiffing a shift in our hormones. If genius were measured in sensory awareness, our dogs would be at the top of the class.

The bottom line is that it's important not to anthropomorphize your dog too much. Dogs have a magical way of navigating the world that we should stand in awe of rather than disregard. In her book, *Animals Make Us Human*, Temple Grandin identifies anthropomorphism as the phenomenon of treating animals like humans, where reality is exclusively viewed through the lens of human values and experiences.

Pause to consider our somewhat egocentric tendency to overlook the unique qualities of our beloved dogs. Many people unwittingly attribute human motivations and characteristics to their dogs rather than honoring their distinct needs, desires, and natural reactions. It's here, in the light of this denial, that their anxiety often takes root.

Identifying Your Dog's Triggers

Triggers are noises, objects, or sightings that are either unfamiliar and frightening or familiar and scary to your dog. Every dog is unique.

Before diving into the rest of this book, make a list of the things you know or think might be triggering your dog's anxiety. Regardless of what's causing or prompting your dog's anxiety, there is nothing wrong with them that can't be improved, managed, or cured entirely.

Unfortunately, your dog's anxiety cannot be soothed with a quick hug, pat on the head, or favorite treat. When their anxiety is triggered, your dog enters an alternative reality where danger lurks, and bad things could happen. Anxiety feels natural to your dog, and in the moment, nothing you do or say can influence their reaction. The only way to calm your dog down is to get them to a safe place and wait it out.

Trigger stacking occurs when a dog faces multiple triggers without a chance to disengage or soothe their nerves. The accumulation of stresses can intensify the dog's distress, amplifying their emotional reactions and potentially leading to aggression. For example, if a dog is sensitive to thunder, unfamiliar dogs, and construction vehicles, experiencing them all at once, such as while out on a walk — can be extremely overwhelming, causing the equivalent of a panic attack.



WARNING

When anxious, your dog will have unique symptoms that range from mild to explosive. If left untreated, your dog's anxiety can result in medical issues, too, such as respiratory and intestinal issues.

ABC: ANTECEDENT-BEHAVIOR-CONSEQUENCE

The pros like to reference their own version of the ABCs when researching and rehabilitating canine anxiety. Here, the letters stand for Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence. This framework analyzes behavior by examining what happens before, during, and after an action. The *antecedent* is what occurs before the behavior, the *behavior* is the action itself, and the *consequence* is what follows the behavior. This framework helps clarify the context and triggers of behavior and its outcomes.

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Not all dogs respond to interruptive stimuli in the same way. A confident dog might be so conditioned to a noise as to ignore it. Another dog might be excited by the noise if it has been associated with positive events. Other dogs experience an alert response when an unrecognizable event or a stimulus reminds them of a scary experience or immediate danger, causing them to grow anxious. Behaviors can vary from mild reactions like lip licking or turning away to intense reactions like running away or showing aggression.

Soothing Anxiety

We're taught all our lives how to deal with anxiety — we're told to talk it out, to practice mindfulness, or to exercise. Your dog needs similar outlets. Although you might know road construction won't harm you, the barking dog can't get to you, and babies are not zombies, a dog with anxiety isn't so sure. Respect your dog's anxiety and remember, in most instances, there are only two things that will soothe them:

- » **Distance:** Once you identify something causing your dog anxiety, move away from it. When possible, bring your dog into a comforting place, whether that's behind your legs, a room in your home, or a place away from the triggering event. If you're walking outside and your dog gets unnerved by a dog, person, or thing, divert your route and wait to praise or treat your dog until they regain a sense of calm.
- » **Time:** Anxiety fills your dog with stress hormones that may take some time to dissipate. Notice the length of time your dog needs to regain their sense of joy and adventure. Each dog has their own anxiety blueprint. The more you work with them, the faster they'll learn to recover.

While anxiety and fear are warranted reactions from your dog's perspective, they can make different and more positive associations. Chapter 3 explores how freedom, food, and fun inspire joy and confidence.

You Are Not Alone

We all want to be safe. No matter what type of anxiety your dog suffers, simply picking up this book promises results. Remember, anxiety is just one part of their personality — and it's manageable, even curable, in many cases.

With your help, your dog can learn directions, engage in fun activities, and develop a life framed by consistency and reassurances that have been lacking until now.

Each part of this book is dedicated to a specific type of anxiety. You may find that your dog struggles with more than one, and since each part is standalone, you can start anywhere you like! The chapters in this part help build your understanding of dog anxiety and how to identify your dog's triggers. Let's get started!

