Bark!

The Science of Helping Your Anxious, Fearful, or Reactive Dog

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Foreword by Cat Warren

An excerpt from *Bark!*

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The Facts About Fearful Dogs

Myths and outdated (but still common) narratives about fearful dogs, and dogs in general, can lead you astray. I want to dispel these myths, but since repeating myths can make them more salient, I'll stick to the truth. Here are a few important facts to bear in mind.

It's okay to comfort a fearful dog. For a long time, some trainers used to falsely say that you should not comfort a fearful dog. This isn't true. Your job, as your dog's guardian, is to protect them from fearful events and to provide comfort in stressful situations. You are a secure base from which your dog can explore and a safe haven for them to return to when things are stressful. So if your dog is fearful and wants comfort, you should comfort them. But bear in mind that not all dogs want this, and that comfort will likely not be enough to resolve the situation.

Ditch the idea of dominance. Dominance is an outdated concept in dog training that comes from older studies of captive wolves. We now know much more about how wolves cooperate and work together. One of the big problems with dominance as it pertains to dogs is that it is associated with aversive approaches to dog training. And dominance is associated with some odd ideas about how you live with your dog too. Ditching this idea has many benefits, because it means you understand that it's okay to let your dog on the sofa or bed if you want, to go ahead of you on a walk, and to eat their meals in peace.

Dogs should be able to make choices and have control over their lives, as far as possible. Another drawback of old-fashioned ideas about dominance is that people

expect their dog to always do as they're told. In fact, it's much better for your dog if you give them choices. That includes the choice of whether to be petted. (Do a consent test if you're not sure—pause and see if they ask for more or not.) It includes the choice of whether to take part in training. If they wander off from a training session, that's up to them. (It's your job to find ways to motivate them to enjoy taking part.)

Don't force your dog to face their fears. The technical term for this is *flooding*. In everyday language, you might use the expression "throwing them in the deep end." It doesn't help, and it's likely to make things worse. Instead, as you'll see from the rest of this book, it's important to protect your dog from things they are scared of. The way to resolve those fears involves gradual exposures and always helping the dog to feel safe.

Dogs don't need to be provoked to see how bad a problem is. Any dog can bite, and you shouldn't ever put a dog in a situation to see if they will do so. Since dog training isn't regulated, it's important to know that dog trainers should not provoke a dog either. The emphasis should be on helping the dog feel safe. Sometimes people will provoke a dog to get a bad reaction and then use that reaction to justify using harsh methods with the dog, but . . .

You don't need to use harsh methods just because the dog has behavior issues. Although harsh methods may suppress a behavior in the moment, ultimately they risk making the dog's behavior worse. Studies show that aversive methods like shock and prong collars, leash "corrections," yelling at the dog, and so on have risks that include increased aggression, anxiety, fear, pessimism, and stress, and a worse relationship with the people in the dog's life. Some studies also find that these methods are less effective than reward-based training.

Dogs do like treats. If your dog isn't interested in chicken or cheese or other treats in a particular situation, ask yourself if that situation is scary or difficult for them. Not taking treats is often a sign of fear. Take steps to make the situation less alarming. The other question to ask is: Are the treats good enough? For example, maybe your dog isn't interested in pieces of hot dog but would work for pieces of cheese, meatball, or roast beef. (Of course, if your dog really isn't interested in food, see your vet.)

It's the dog's perception that counts. It can be hard to understand why a dog is scared of something, but that fear doesn't have to make sense to us. Maybe a car once backfired loudly at the same time that your dog reached a gate, and now they are afraid of the gate. Maybe they have become afraid of the higher-pitched noises from the dishwasher. Maybe your newly adopted dog has never seen a door before, and the way it swings open and shut is alarming to them. It doesn't matter if the fear seems stupid; the point is that the dog is afraid. We should acknowledge that and figure out what to do about it. Ignoring it, just because the fear seems daft, is not a solution.

Dogs don't just grow out of fears. If your dog is afraid of something, it's likely that they will continue to be afraid—or get much worse—if you don't do something about it.

Even though the dog is fearful, training should be fun for them. Training should be done at a level where the dog is happy and relaxed. Sometimes people ask me how to know when they are doing "too much" or if they are "pushing too far" because they think training a fearful dog involves subjecting them to things they are afraid of. But as you'll see later in this book, you can find ways to train that keep the dog comfortable, and that's when the magic happens.