

FEAR AND ANXIETY ON THE BRAIN

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The standard caveat applies. If you are seeing signs of aggression or extreme fear or anxiety in your dog, please work with a certified behaviour consultant in your area.

Every dog experiences both fear and anxiety in their lives, just as we do. Some would argue that these emotions are not only natural but important tools for making sense of the world. They can help to modify our behaviour and improve our chances for survival. The problem arises when we think of these two terms (fear and anxiety) as the same thing. Understanding the differences between them is critical to helping our dogs overcome any fears or anxieties they may face in their lives.

Fear is an emotional response to a known or defined (real) threat.

Anxiety is an emotional response to a vague or non-existent (imagined) threat.

If a giant 3-foot spider were to suddenly drop down from the ceiling beside me, I would scream and jump back from my keyboard. I might even do my patented spider dance. This is a natural fear-based response. The spider is an unexpected but real threat. After a few moments, my pre-frontal cortex will start working again (assuming the giant spider doesn't decide to scramble toward me), and I can then determine how best to deal with this situation.

But let's say, for the sake of argument, that a giant spider has never dropped down from the ceiling in my studio but, that for some unknown reason, I find myself imagining a large spider on the ceiling. Within milliseconds my hands start to get clammy. I tell myself

there is nothing to worry about as I feel my mouth going dry, and I begin glancing furtively at my ceiling to check for giant South-American man-eating spider nests. Within a few short minutes, I am short of breath and no longer sitting in my chair. I'm no longer in the room. I am standing in the hall, afraid to move because the lights are off downstairs and I could swear I saw something move along the ceiling.

I am now in a full-blown anxiety-induced panic attack, and this was brought about by an entirely non-existent and imagined threat. But if my partner were suddenly to walk up behind me and say something, I would likely scream and kick him in the face in a full-fledged fight-or-flight response. I am just trying to stay alive.

Fear is easy to bounce back from. We can see that it was actually a rubber toy our partner thought would make for an awesome practical joke. Aside from making him sleep on the sofa for a week, there is no real fallout from the event. I can see that it was not actually a giant, man-eating spider and move on.

Anxiety is not so easy to shake off. The biggest reason for this is that anxiety is self-reinforcing. There was never a giant spider or anything remotely like one, but I still panicked, so the anxiety is real. The end result was the same whether or not there was a horde of things crawling across my ceiling.

All of this goes for our dogs as well. If something appears suddenly in their environment, it is normal for them to jump or yelp or even growl at it once. But then they should be able to bounce back and resume their day-to-day activities without any lasting effect from the encounter.

Most of the aggressive dogs I work with show signs of anxiety. They are constantly on alert, scanning the

environment for the next potential threat. They are already working themselves up long before anything scary actually appears. By the time we meet another dog or person wearing a hat (or whatever they are anxious about), these dogs are already flooded with testosterone and cortisol. They are in full fight-or-flight mode. They are already having a panic attack and nothing has happened yet.

If you feel that your dog may be suffering from anxiety, the first thing to do is to help get them out of scary situations. Help them calm down and come back to being in their right mind. This means avoiding areas and situations that cause them to feel anxious and getting them out of those situations as quickly as possible when they do happen. Forcing your dog to just "deal with it" will only result in your dog having a full-blown panic attack and risk having them move from flight to fight. The next step is to locate and work with a certified behaviour consultant that uses 100% truly dog-friendly methods.

