

5 Ways to Improve Your Dog's Confidence

Elizabeth Racine, DVM

Is your dog a nervous Nelly? Does he hate being away from you, even just for a few minutes? If so, you're not alone! Canine anxiety is one of the most common behavior disorders that dog owners face. Canine anxiety can present itself in many forms, such as separation anxiety, noise phobias, fear aggression, and destructive behaviors. Whatever form your dog's anxiety takes, there is no doubt that it has a negative impact on his quality of life and on his bond with you. Fortunately, there are easy steps you can take at home to help your dog relax and feel more confident.

#1. Establish a Routine

Just like anxious people, anxious dogs struggle when they don't know what to expect. Making your dog's life as predictable as possible can go a long way in helping him feel more relaxed and confident. Your routine does not need to be elaborate. The important part is establishing a consistent pattern. For example, every morning you wake up, feed your dog, take him outside, and offer him a treat, always in that order. Your dog will learn when to expect each activity, eliminating the stress of an unpredictable schedule. Transition periods - such as those moments when you're getting ready to leave the house - are often the most stressful for an anxious dog. Maintaining a calm, quiet routine at these times will encourage your dog to stay calm as well.

#2. Provide a Safe Space

We all need a little "me time" occasionally! Nervous dogs feel better if they have a safe, quiet area to retreat to when they're feeling stressed. This should be an area where your dog can rest undisturbed, such as a crate or a bedroom. Your dog's safe space should include access to his basic needs: food, water, a comfortable resting place, and a few toys. To make the space even cozier, try adding some calming pheromones or quiet classical music to put your dog at ease. Putting your dog in his safe space before a stressful event such as a thunderstorm or the arrival of guests can help keep him calm and out of the way until the event is over. You can even train your dog to go to this space on command. For tips on training your dog to love resting in a crate, check out Dr. Sophia Yin's crate training handout, available here: <http://info.drSophiayin.com/crate-training-handout>

#3. Use Positive Reinforcement

Training your dog basic obedience commands such as sit, stay, and down will not only improve his manners, but also will teach him that life has rules. Positive reinforcement training involves encouraging desired behaviors by rewarding them with something positive, like a tasty treat or a favorite toy. The simple command-response-reward pattern of positive reinforcement training is consistent and predictable, helping your dog learn what to expect. Dogs trained with positive reinforcement methods learn to be more confident and outgoing, often offering these desirable behaviors unbidden in the

hopes of receiving a reward. Training your dog should never involve punishment of any sort, including scolding, hitting, alpha rolls, electric shock, prong collars, and other “corrective” measures. These methods rely on fear and pain to force your dog to obey, which will only make his anxiety worse!

#4. Teach Relaxation

Believe it or not, you can actually train your dog to relax on command. A great method for this is Dr. Karen Overall’s Protocol for Relaxation, which teaches your dog to go to his “place” (such as a mat or crate) and settle down on command. If you’re especially ambitious, you can even teach your dog to take a deep breath when he gets to his mat, aiding the physiologic aspect of the relaxation process. This protocol is excellent for anxious and insecure dogs, because it shows your dog how to be calm away from you. This new, relaxed independence will allow him to feel more confident even when you’re out of the room. While the initial training process for this command can be a bit tedious, the rewards are worth the effort! You can find step-by-step instructions for training this protocol here:

<https://www.boulderhumane.org/sites/default/files/ProtocolforRelaxation.pdf>

#5. Encourage Exercise & Mental Stimulation

A tired dog is a happy dog! In both humans and animals, exercise is a natural way to combat many behavior disorders, including anxiety. Allowing your dog ample opportunity to work off his excess energy will help him feel more at ease, and it will reduce his need to engage in destructive behaviors at home. Aim to give your dog at least one hour of exercise every day. High energy and working dog breeds may need even more daily activity. If your dog has previously been a couch potato, increase his daily exercise gradually to reduce his risk of injury. At home, exercise your dog’s mind with puzzle toys and plenty of active play time. Puzzle toys are also a great way to keep your dog focused on a positive experience during stressful situations, such as when guests come to visit. He won’t feel the need to bark endlessly at the newcomers if he’s too busy figuring out how to get snacks from his new treat ball!

Summary

Helping your dog gain more confidence doesn’t need to be complicated. Creating a calm, predictable, and rewarding environment for your pup can go a long way towards managing canine anxiety. However, if your dog’s anxiety symptoms are severe, it’s always best to talk to your veterinarian. Your veterinarian can help you identify your dog’s unique triggers, and can develop a behavior modification program to suit your dog’s individual needs. With a little extra training and care, your dog can learn to be relaxed and confident so he can keep on living his best life.