

Scaredy Dog

Helping your fearful pet

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Q. My dog Lily is a Bichon mix, about eight years old. My husband and I got her through a rescue organization, and we have had her for almost a year. We suspect she was abused. She is extremely scared of loud noises, yelling, and a little skittish at times. My husband says that I baby her too much because I hold her when she is scared and talk to her like she is a human. He thinks I am rewarding her for being scared and that will just make her more scared. All I really want is for her to be happy and feel loved. Is this wrong for me to do? If so, is there something that I should be doing differently?

A. Kudos to you and your husband for taking in an older dog in need, and even more so for making her well-being a priority.

While it's possible that Lily was abused by her previous owner, fearful behavior in most dogs is a result of inadequate socialization as a puppy, often in tandem with genetics that predispose a dog to be fearful. Given that Lily has likely been fearful for all of her 8 years, she will never be a truly confident dog, however that does not mean that she cannot be helped.

When our dogs are afraid, just like our children, it is a normal human reaction to want to comfort them...it would be cruel not to. Contrary to what your husband thinks, comforting a fearful dog does not "reward" or reinforce fear, increasing fearful behavior. Reassuring a frightened dog by calmly talking and gently holding and stroking her will help her feel safe and secure and give her a more positive association with what triggers her fear. *How* you comfort your dog when she is fearful may be the premise of your husband's assertion that you "...baby her too much". Perhaps he's suggesting that you are overdoing it a bit. While gently reassuring a frightened dog may calm her, if you are anxious and exaggerated in your attempts to reassure your dog, you may cause her even more stress, and her negative association with what she fears may worsen.

Begin to help your dog by managing her environment, as much as possible, to avoid the triggers that cause her to react with fear...in Lily's case, loud noises in particular. If the noise of the vacuum cleaner scares her, she can be in another room, in her crate if she's comfortable in one, with the door closed, a chew toy to play with, and the radio on softly, while you clean. Don't walk her on the streets where loud construction vehicles are likely to pass by. Try not to communicate to someone in an adjoining room by shouting. When she is afraid, reassure her calmly.

Consulting a qualified trainer or canine behavior consultant is the next step in helping your dog

to be less anxious and fearful. Through behavior modification procedures, your dog's associations with the things that make her fearful are changed so that her anxiety is reduced. Someone experienced in these training techniques can work with you on an appropriate behavior modification plan for working with your dog. There are also effective medications available for fearful dogs (even specifically for noise sensitive dogs) to assist in the behavior modification process. Some medications can be taken only as needed when your dog is about to face a situation that triggers fear (e.g., veterinary visits, thunderstorms, etc.). Others may be prescribed long-term for more chronic fear. Speak with your veterinarian about medications that may help your dog.

Living in a state of constant or frequent fear is just as unpleasant for a dog as it is for a human, and not a way to spend a life. Because you love your dog, you want her to be happy and feel loved. By helping her to overcome her fears, you will be accomplishing both.

Two excellent books on canine fear:

The Cautious Canine, by Patricia McConnell

Help For Your Fearful Dog, by Nicole Wilde