



Spooky Barking

Spooky barking or alarm barking at strangers is a common behavior for many dogs. This type of barking is usually rooted in a fear of new stimuli, like people, bicycles, or even a leaf. This fear can be influenced by the dog's genetics, poor socialization, or a combination of the two. Regardless of the source, the solution involves remedial positive exposure to the world. A dog training class can be a helpful way to introduce your dog to new people, places and sounds. Throughout this document, we will be describing scenarios and management for a dog that spooky barks at people, but the same management applies to dogs that spooky bark at non-people triggers as well.

Some dogs are more likely to bark at certain types of people — tall people, people carrying things, people wearing funny hats, etc. Many spooky barkers can be fearful of men or children in particular. Men tend to be taller, with deeper voices, and to some dogs this is scary. Children often run, jump, or stare — such direct staring can often be very intimidating, and result in barking. Other dogs will simply bark whenever they see any person they haven't met before. We recommend you make a list of things that scare your dog.

Management is the first step to helping your dog feel more comfortable. Avoid triggers if possible, or move away from the trigger. If you are on a walk and you spy a woman with a large hat carrying groceries a few blocks away, cross the street to create a safe distance for your dog. If a mailman arrives at a certain time of day or you know that a visitor will be coming to your house, keep your dog away from the front door (in another room where he cannot see or hear them approaching). We manage these situations so that are dogs don't continue to practice these responses. If we want to help our dogs learn to respond differently when they're unsure, then we need to change the way they see these triggers and manage how they come into contact with them.

Building a Positive Association with Scary Triggers

A walk is a great time to work on exposing your dog to new people and building a positive association with them. Reward them for seeing people before they react by barking, or even if they aren't reacting. Every time the dog sees a person, the dog gets a treat. Here's how it works:

- Be vigilant about your surroundings, and when you see a person, move away from the person by calling the dog away with you before the dog reacts or even notices the trigger. Toss the treat in the opposite direction of the scary thing. This will help give the dog space from the scary thing as well as help them practice to move away from the trigger instead of trying to scare the trigger away.

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- From a distance where the dog is not reacting, play the “Look-At-That!” game. If your dog is not eating or able to look towards you, you might still be too close. The same rule applies if you notice your dog begin to grab more intensely at the treats.

Look At That! Game:

1. Person (or trigger) appears.
2. Immediately say “Yes!” or “Good!” in a soft, happy, upbeat tone.
3. Present dog with a treat.
4. Repeat for every trigger.
 - You might need to adjust how your dog sees the trigger at first. Often it’s easier to watch something walk away, so start there. You might also only be able to practice for a few repetitions before you notice your dog is staring or becoming tense, so add in a few more steps or move along on your walk
 - If you can, offer the treat in a manner that requires your dog to look away from the trigger to get their treat. This might mean dropping the treat, tossing it for your dog to catch, or feeding closer to your body so that your dog has to move to reach the treat.

If you think you’re too close to an oncoming trigger and your dog hasn’t quite noticed it, try playing find it. It’s a simple game that’s very helpful in distracting your dog past a situation that is not suited for training.

1. Say “Find It”
2. Toss the treat
3. When they look up, repeat the process until you can sneak them away to safety or the trigger passes

Lower Stress, Quicker Learning

Dogs that are stressed out can’t learn effectively – they’re just too preoccupied with whatever is making them uncomfortable. One of the keys to working with a fearful dog is making sure the dog’s day-to-day environment is relatively stress-free. Chaotic households are not ideal for scaredy dogs. If you know there is going to be a chaotic event coming up, like lots of visitors around for Christmas or a party etc., don’t forget to include plan for your dog’s comfort. Work out in advance a safe, secure place where your dog can be undisturbed for the duration of the event, such as a room that visitors can’t access. Regular exercise, play, and routine are important considerations for fearful dogs. Dogs are creatures of habit and love settling into routines. For spooky barkers in particular, routine has the effect of offsetting the “unknown” and can go a long way towards relaxing them.