

Canine Phobias- A Dog's Worst Nightmare



Dogs, like some other species including humans, can sometimes develop an excessive, irrational fear of something animate, inanimate or situational. This state of affairs falls into the category of a phobia. A phobia is an intense and persistent fear that occurs for as long the phobic dog is confronted by, or even anticipating, the triggering cue. A phobia is typically acquired as a result adverse life experiences, often ones that are repeated, though in some circumstances a single trigger can consolidate a particular cue as a phobic trigger.

According to the Diagnostic Manual of [Psychiatry](#) there are several different type of phobia: specific, animal type, natural [environment](#) type (e.g., heights, storms, and water), blood-injection-injury type, and situational type (e.g., airplanes, elevators, enclosed places).

Another type in children includes avoidance of loud sounds or costumed characters. Dogs get all of these types of phobia.

One example of a [specific phobia](#) that occurs in dogs and people is a fear of insects (I call it "insectophobia"). Take Mabel, a 1.5-year-old spayed female black Labrador retriever living in a rural area of New England. One summer, Mabel suddenly developed extreme reactivity to deer flies, constantly scanning the environment for them. When she saw one she would run around the house in a state of panic and bury herself under things trying to hide. The situation was far from reasonable. It had become excessive and debilitating to the point where her owners had considered euthanasia as the most humane solution.

The transformation occurred after a formerly carefree Mabel went swimming at a nearby pond with her owners and a friend's dog. Her owners lost sight of her for a several long minutes and eventually found her hiding, burrowed under some old clothes in the rear section of their truck's cab. Afterwards Mable was seen licking her belly and scratching, so presumably she had been stung by the flies. Her owners remember seeing deer flies around that fateful day so the presumption was that she had been terrorized by the flies.

From that time on, Mabel showed reluctance to go out for walks, was hypervigilant and spent most days with her tail tucked tail tucked, sometimes circling nervously. She panicked and burrowed in the car and hid at neighbor's house where she used to be very happy and would play with her dog friend. She experienced "significant and persistent fear when in the presence of, or anticipating the presence of, the object of (her) fear." That is, she had developed a [PTSD](#)-like phobia.



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My sister was also terrified of stinging insects. Her nemesis was not deer flies but yellow jackets (“wasps”). She would cry or scream and try to run away whenever a wasp was anywhere close. Her fear was so extreme that it escalated to become fear of anything black and yellow – like a sweater. I do not recollect if this extreme and temporarily incapacitating fear developed because she was strung by a wasp or whether it was acquired by observing my mother who was always wary around wasps having been stung multiple by a queen wasp when she reached her hand into a package of almonds. On this occasion, her arm swelled up like a balloon and she learned that she was allergic to wasp stings. From that day forth she exhibited, let’s say, profound avoidance where it came to wasp.

In people, animal type phobia can directed toward and veritable zoo-full of different species and are often referred to as zoophobia. In dogs, the list of other species to which they can become phobic is exhaustive, but humans have to be top of the list. Many dogs that have been physically abused have an exaggerated, extreme fear reaction when confronted by people remotely resembling the original wrongdoers. Men are frequently the triggers, often men wearing specific apparel – baseball hats, sunglasses, etc. Sometimes the dog’s reaction is to cringe, run away and hide or simply to flop on the ground in learned helplessness. Other dogs will take a proactive approach and attack people who pose no threat whatsoever --- just because they are there. Best to take no chances, they must reason. Fear is what drives them, and that fear is can become so excessive and as to be a problem for all concerned. An excessive and irrational fear is a phobia, by definition.

Natural environment type phobias are epitomized in dogs by thunderstorm phobia. Affected dogs will pace, hide, salivate, shake, and generally panic during storms. Many seek their owners’ reassurance and press close to them or hunker down on their lap. If their owner is away, however, these dogs show barrier frustration and some will break out of the home by hurling themselves through fly screen windows (even or the 2nd or 3rd floor) and – if unhurt – will just keep running, perhaps trying to outrun the storm.

Blood-injection-injury type phobias are one other reasons dogs panic when brought to the veterinarian’s office. Like children, they do not know what the purpose of a blood draw is and if it is painful, they remember the experience for years. I know. One of my daughters had such a fear for many years after a botched venipuncture when she was very young. In dogs, the same occurs, not just with venipuncture but with injections in general. Multiple painful injections magnify the problem until the dog is in such a state of panic at the doctor’s office that sedation is needed to get vaccination or blood draws accomplished.

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The prototypical situational phobia in dogs is classical [separation anxiety](#), probably better named separation phobia because it is excessive and irrational. These dogs never learn that their owner always comes home again and many get worse over time, not better. Dogs with separation [anxiety](#) cannot bear to be separated from their owners or simply have fear of being left alone. The condition could easily classify as form of [agoraphobia](#) because it involves fear of a situation from which escape is impossible.

One of the presenting signs of canine separation anxiety is barrier frustration in which affected dogs will claw at the back of doors or gnaw on window frames in frantic attempts to escape – often causing serious damage to property. It is as if their home becomes a prison when the owner is not there. Some owners try to resolve the problem by putting their dog in a crate. You can understand that this “solution” likely make matters much worse for a dog with separation anxiety. Some crated dogs develop the strength of 10 dogs in their panic to escape and may break teeth or nails in frantic to get out. Others may vomit or have anxiety-driven diarrhea.

The final type of phobia in children, extreme fear of loud sounds or fear of costumed characters, also occurs in dogs. Firework phobia is one example of a sound phobia. I diagnosed on dog I saw with “parrotophobia” -- after much detective work – when I found a parrot’s loud screaming was the trigger for the dog’s frequent “panic attacks.” Finally, costumed characters (think Halloween) can really cause some dogs to exhibit extreme fear. They just don’t understand the weirdness and it cannot be explained to them. Neither can the uniforms of UPS or FedEx people or those of tradesmen, be explained to a dog whose reaction to them is often irrational and excessive. My young son was terrified of the realistic-looking pirates in the “Pirates of the Caribbean” exhibit at Disney World. His extremely [fearful](#) behavior was ameliorated when we told him the pirates were “only modelling.” Fortunately a life-long phobia of people dressed a pirates was narrowly averted.

I see the many parallels between fears and phobias that occur in animals and people as yet more evidence of the “One Medicine” concept applied to [cognitive](#) function and dysfunction. Much psychological research has been performed using animal models. Ideas of classical conditioning and positive and negative reinforcement were first developed in animals and -- whether we like it or not -- apply to the human animal, too. Mammals “from mice to men” have the same brain regions, neurotransmitters and [neural](#) circuitry. Why would we not develop similar psychopathologies? Certainly we have a lot to learn about ourselves from studying animals. For phobias and PTSD, which share similar neural mechanisms, a rodent model such as “fear-potentiated startle” has much to offer in terms of learning about the psychopathology, genetic and epigenetic influences as well as aiding the development of effective treatments.