



FEATURE

Anxiety

Extract from *The Complete Book of Cat & Dog Health* by Lise Hansen DVM MRCVS

It must be said that fear, reactivity or anxiety is generally the result of a lack of early socialisation.

We must not also forget that aggressive behaviour, in many cases, is based in fear.

Two very common situations that cause problematic, anxiety based behaviour in dogs is fear of car rides and separation anxiety when he is left home alone. These problems vary on a broad scale from slight reluctance to absolute panic. What they have in common is that they are problems with solutions. The earlier you address the problem, the quicker it will be solved.

Prevention is always easier than cure, but no matter how you got there, or how severe your dog's phobia, I promise you that these problems are always solvable. Always.

You will not forever have to arrange your life around needing to take your dog to work with you, employing dog sitters, or taking other measures to avoid these stressful situations, nor will you have to rehome or even euthanise your dog because these issues make your life difficult.

You may need to involve a professional dog behaviourist for a while to guide the process, and you will need to commit to a period of intensive training or 're-learning,' but I promise it will be worth it.

Fear of car rides or motion sickness

Motion sickness is caused by overstimulation of the labyrinth of the inner ear, that controls balance, resulting in nausea and sometimes vomiting. There is also a significant degree of learned behaviour involved, as someone who is anxious and stressed will be more likely to be carsick. Similarly, someone who has been carsick before, may be anxious about getting into the car again.

I don't find it very useful to try to distinguish between dogs who suffer true motion sickness, with dizziness and nausea, and those who are agitated 'only' because they fear car rides. No doubt there is a big overlap between the two groups.

All dogs must be able to travel in a car, and all dogs can learn to do so. There are many steps you can take to both reduce anxiety and relieve nausea, depending on the nature and severity of the problem.

Preventing problems

I suspect that many puppies who develop a strong aversion to car travel were subjected to an unbearable first car ride when they were picked up from the breeder to travel to their new home. If the young puppy experiences being removed from everything he knows to go in a car for the very first time on an hour-long journey, who can blame him if the experience is remembered as a bad one?

There are great breeders who make sure that their puppies are taken on short car rides, as part of the early socialisation effort, but, for most puppies, the first car ride will, unfortunately, be associated with what is probably the most stressful day of their lives.

To prevent this becoming a problem, you will need to get him, if not straight back on the horse, then straight back into the car in order to turn around his perception. Start by taking him on very short trips. Let him sit on the lap of a passenger, and keep an eye on his reaction. It is ok for him to be slightly worried, but don't let him work himself



into a panic. Make sure to stop on a good note, when he is calm.

During the first weeks of his new life with you, try to take him in a car (even just for five or ten minutes) every day, if possible.

In exactly the same way, training to prevent separation anxiety starts, if not on the first day, then certainly after the first week, when your puppy has settled into his new home. Gradually leave him alone in a room for a few minutes – perhaps while he explores a toy or tasty treat – while you close the door behind you and hang out the washing. Empty the mailbox, or take out the trash. This repeated and brief experience will show him that being alone is temporary and not a big deal.

The next step is to leave him home alone for half-an-hour, making sure to return when he is calm. It is a good idea at this stage to introduce a ritual such as giving him a treat, and saying the same phrase so that he knows what to expect – and then just go. Don't look to him to show that it's ok. It is okay.

Within a month of joining your family, your puppy should be used to being home alone for several hours. In my experience, this happens from necessity in working families, but is easily overlooked or unduly postponed in homes where there is no immediate need for the puppy to be left alone. Whether you are a pensioner, on maternity leave, or working from home, when your new puppy moves in, please remember that being alone is a crucial skill that he should learn while he is still very young.

Dealing with an established problem

If, for whatever reason, you find that your dog has a real phobia, be it separation anxiety, an aversion to car rides, or an overreaction to a completely different situation or stimulus, turning the negative reaction into a positive one may be a far more involved and demanding process. With daily training, however, it should be possible to see a big shift within a few months.

In these situations, training needs to be broken down into small steps; you never want to ask for more than he is capable of. Never entice or force your reluctant and frightened dog. He needs a small, achievable goal and a reward for reaching it. In this way, step-by-step, milestone-by-milestone, by breaking the impossible and unmanageable into hundreds of small, successful steps, you'll get there in the end. The negative association can and will be turned into a positive one.

I suggest that you turn the training process into a game for both of you. No doubt, you'll get to feel silly along the way. Patience, dedication, and a well-developed sense of humour are the required attributes.

The training (re-learning) starts at the point when your dog begins to show signs of stress. I am going to use car rides in the following example, but the principle applies to most problems you may need to address. Break the process into many smaller goals, and don't proceed until your dog is completely comfortable with the previous step. Every exercise must end on a positive note.

The benefit of working with a dog behaviourist cannot be overemphasized. Do engage someone who can map out the road, monitor your progress, and support you when you lose heart. This way the goal is already in sight.

Learning to enjoy car rides (and other overwhelmingly scary experiences)

If your dog begins to look worried as soon as you reach for your car keys or put on your coat, this is precisely where your training starts.

As often as possible every single day, put on your coat and jingle your car keys, disrobe and, with heartfelt excitement, do a joyful victory dance with your dog, preferably involving cheese or whatever treat happens to be his particular favourite. Half-an-hour later, you get to do the whole silly act again.

Once he reacts to you picking up your keys and putting on your coat with happy excitement (or ignores you completely, depending on his temperament) – in other words, once this previous trigger no longer elicits a negative response – you can tick the first box and move on to the next step.

Now, perhaps, five times a day, grab your keys, put on your coat, put his leash on him and go halfway down the drive before you (in full view of the neighbours, of course) do your celebration dance, turn around, and go back inside. Before long, you and your dog will cheerfully go and pat the car before he is amply rewarded, and you both go back inside.



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Next, you might just sit in the car and enjoy a treat before returning inside without ever turning on the engine.

I'm sure you get the picture. It is fun, invariably silly, and requires endless repetition, but it is absolutely doable. Don't look to your dog to assess when he becomes worried and needs to stop. Aim to stop before he becomes worried. Each step may take days or weeks; it takes as long as it takes. Don't ever try to cajole or force him to do something before he is ready. Each negative experience will undermine the process and set you back several steps. For this reason, ideally avoid any car trips at all during the training period. The whole point is to reverse his earlier negative associations; not remind him of them.

Similarly, if what you are addressing is separation anxiety, rather than aversion to car rides, you may need to arrange for him never to be home alone for several months until the training is complete.

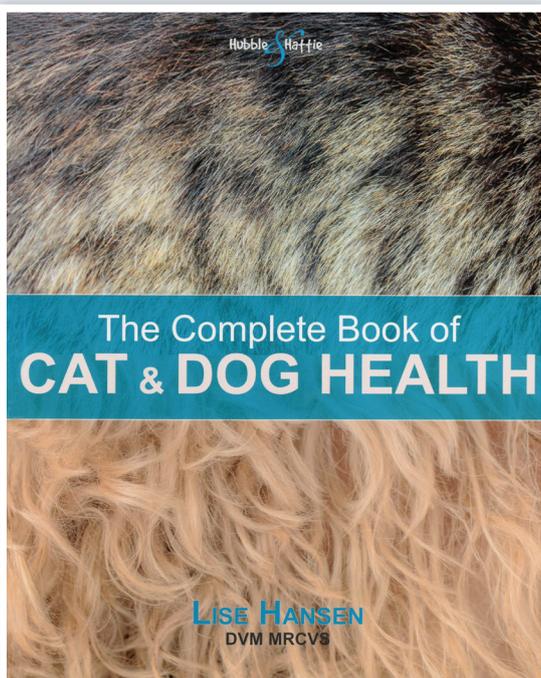
The above is an outline of a possible training sequence for dog with a genuine phobia about car rides. If your dog is less affected, you simply start your training at the point where he begins to show unease. The important point is never to start driving with a scared and reluctant dog. We all learn best with fun and rewards. Nobody learns anything from being scared.

Relieving Motion Sickness

Apart from focused training, as outlined, there are several things you can try to ease motion sickness. Dogs who suffer carsickness should travel only on an empty stomach. Avoid driving during the heat of the day, and slow down on winding roads. Some dogs prefer being able to look out the window (preferably facing the direction of travel), while others prefer lying on the floor. I'll let you decide whether your dog should travel in a crate, on the front or back seat, but please, please don't let him stick his head out of the window as this can cause inflammation of ears and eyes. If your dog is nervous, a calming food supplement may help.

Calming pheromones are available as a collar and as a spray you can use in the car before setting off. This can make the car a happier place.

If you have tried the advice in this chapter and still have a problem, do see a dog behaviourist. If the problem persists or is obvious physical motion sickness, rather than a behavioural issue, seek the advice of a veterinarian, who is skilled in classical homeopathy or acupuncture. These issues are always solvable.



ABOUT THE BOOK

A complete and comprehensive guide to health care for cats and dogs, providing invaluable advice on essential aspects of care, such as diet and vaccinations, as well as a guide to holistic treatments.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since graduating from vet school in 1994, Lise Hansen DVM MRCVS Cert1AVH PCH has spent the last 25 years working in small animal practice. Early in her veterinary career. Lise pursued post graduate training in veterinary homeopathy and acupuncture.

Today she focuses on her homeopathic referral practice spread over three clinics: her own practice in Denmark, along with a vet clinic in Copenhagen and also London.