

THE ACADEMY FOR CANINE BEHAVIOR AND TRAINING

Is My Dog *Aggressive*, Afraid, or Something More?

A guide for owners of fearful, reactive, aggressive, or anxious dogs.

Living with a dog who growls, lunges, hides, panics, or shuts down can leave you feeling exhausted and alone. But your dog is not "bad." Something is happening beneath the surface. This guide will help you understand what, and show you the path forward.

Understanding what your dog is *really* experiencing

The truth is, behavior like this is rarely simple. A dog who growls, lunges, hides, panics, snaps, or shuts down is not just "being bad." Something is happening underneath the behavior. The first step is understanding what your dog is actually experiencing.

This guide was created to help you make sense of what you are seeing, recognize when a behavior problem may be bigger than basic obedience, and understand what a fearful or aggressive dog evaluation is designed to uncover. Our approach is grounded in science, practical experience, and deep compassion for both ends of the leash.

"You do not have to figure this out alone. Our goal is to help you move from fear and frustration to clarity, safety, and a plan that actually fits your dog."

Fear, Reactivity, Anxiety and *Aggression*

These four experiences often overlap and look similar from the outside. Knowing the difference is the first step toward knowing how to help.

Fear

Fear is a primal response to a perceived threat. It is not willfulness. It is a survival reflex. A fearful dog is a dog who does not feel safe.

- **Avoidance:** trying to escape the trigger
- **Freezing:** becoming completely still
- **Panting or yawning:** signs of stress
- **Trembling:** shaking from anxiety
- **Defensive aggression:** biting when cornered

Reactivity

Reactivity is an over-the-top emotional response to a specific trigger. It is often rooted in underlying fear or frustration, and it is not the same as aggression.

- Barking excessively at triggers
- Lunging toward dogs or people
- Growling, stiffening, or snapping
- Pulling hard on leash
- Difficulty recovering once triggered

Anxiety

Anxiety is not a personality flaw. It is a nervous system problem. An anxious dog lives in a state of constant low-level tension, and training alone is often not enough.

- **Pacing or restlessness:** trouble settling
- **Destructive behavior:** chewing, escaping
- **Excessive vocalization:** barking or whining
- **Changes in appetite or sleep**
- **Compulsive behaviors:** licking, tail chasing

Aggression

Aggression is a strategy, not a character flaw. Understanding why is far more important than punishing the warning signs away.

- **Fear-based:** reacting to a perceived threat
- **Resource guarding:** food, toys, or space
- **Territorial:** defending home or yard
- **Pain-related:** reacting to discomfort
- **Frustration-based:** unable to escape or access

Your Dog's Body Language and *Triggers*

Most dogs show signs of stress long before they growl, lunge, or bite. Learning to see those early signals can help you step in sooner and give your dog more space before they feel pushed past their limit.

Early Signs of Stress

- Lip licking or frequent yawning
- Turning the head or body away
- Avoiding eye contact
- Whale eye, showing the whites of the eyes
- Pinned or flattened ears
- Tucked tail
- Stiffening of the body
- Closed mouth or tight facial muscles
- Dilated pupils
- Pacing or scanning the room
- Trying to hide or get behind you

Common Triggers

- Other dogs, especially on leash
- Strangers approaching
- Visitors entering the home
- Children running, yelling, or reaching
- Loud noises, fireworks, thunderstorms
- Being touched, hugged, or groomed
- People reaching over the dog's head
- Food, toys, beds, crates, or resting spaces
- Certain surfaces, doorways, or environments
- Being confined or unable to move away

Keep a *Behavior Journal*

When an incident happens, write it down. Patterns in your notes will help a professional understand what is driving the behavior far more than any single event can.

01

What happened right before the reaction?

02

How close was the trigger when the reaction began?

03

What did your dog do first? Then next?

04

How did you respond in the moment?

05

How long did it take your dog to calm down?

06

Has this happened before? Is it getting worse?

Do not intentionally expose your dog to triggers just to gather information. The goal is to notice patterns safely, not to test your dog.

Safety First, *Then* Training

Before any training can begin, your dog needs to be in situations they can actually handle. Management is not giving up. It is the foundation everything else is built on.

Management

REDUCE RISK WHILE YOU BUILD A PLAN

Increase distance

Cross the street, turn around, find quieter routes.

Create space at home

Use baby gates, crates, or separate rooms when visitors arrive.

Avoid high-traffic areas

Choose quieter times and less populated places.

Use secure equipment

Proper collars and leashes your dog cannot back out of.

Management is not a punishment. It is a temporary tool to protect everyone while you work toward something better.

Training

BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND CALM

Desensitization and counterconditioning

Gradually changing how your dog feels about a trigger, at a distance they can handle.

Foundation skills

Sit, stay, come, leave it, and place, giving your dog clear structure.

Coping skills

Helping your dog pause, disengage, and recover instead of immediately reacting.

Relaxation skills

Teaching your dog how to settle, decompress, and return to calm.

Signs it is time to schedule an *evaluation with Bryan*

Fearful, reactive, anxious, and aggressive behavior should never be guessed at. The right plan depends on truly understanding what is driving the behavior. That is exactly what Bryan's evaluation is designed to uncover.

Your dog has growled, snapped, lunged, or bitten.

Your dog reacts strongly to people, dogs, visitors, or handling.

Your dog seems fearful, hypervigilant, or unable to settle.

Your dog panics when left alone or confined.

The behavior is getting worse over time.

You feel unsafe, overwhelmed, or unsure what to do next.

Training has not helped, or the behavior keeps returning.

You are avoiding normal life because of how your dog may react.

READY TO STOP GUESSING?

Schedule a Fearful & *Aggressive Dog Evaluation* with Bryan

This evaluation is not about blame. It is not about labeling your dog as "bad." It is about getting clear on what your dog is experiencing and building a plan that is honest, safe, and realistic for your household.

\$300

Investment

90 min

Session length

In-Person or Virtual

Your choice

SCHEDULE YOUR EVALUATION

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