



# Fear & Anxiety

## Behavior Improvement Plan

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Hello and welcome! We're so glad you're here.

Caring for a dog with fear, phobias, or anxiety can be tough, but Ease is here to make it easier. Our expert team of board-certified veterinary behaviorists and other top behavior professionals, who have dedicated their careers to issues like yours, crafted this step-by-step plan. It's science-backed, effective, and will help your dog.

This plan is your roadmap to helping your dog feel more relaxed and confident, even in challenging situations. Steps 1 and 2 focus on easing your dog's fear and anxiety, while Step 3 and (optional) Step 4 build their coping skills. By committing to this process, you're on the path to making a meaningful difference in your dog's life and your own. Let's get started!

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### Understanding the Behavior

It may be comforting to know that you and your dog are not alone. Fear, phobias, and anxiety are very common in dogs. In fact, about one third of all dogs show fear in one situation or another! It usually shows up within the first year of a dog's life or later after two to three years of age.

There are lots of reasons your dog may become fearful or anxious. Genetic predisposition, certain medical conditions, and the natural aging process (which can bring pain or reduced senses) can amplify fear and anxiety. Past traumas, especially during their formative years but even before birth, can have a lasting effect. While puppies may show signs of this behavior, it can also intensify as your dog matures.

Dogs can develop fears related to a variety of triggers, including sounds, people, other animals, novelty, places, or environments. Some dogs only show fear or anxiety in one or two specific situations. (If sound sensitivities are a concern, you can ask your veterinarian about a

referral to Ease for more targeted support on that issue.) When your dog shows fear or anxiety across multiple areas, they may be experiencing global fear or generalized anxiety.

### Global Fear vs. Generalized Anxiety

Both global fear and generalized anxiety in dogs involve feelings of nervousness and apprehension, but they differ in scope and triggers:

- **Global fear** is when your dog is afraid of multiple, specific triggers. These triggers are usually separate from one another and may include (1) people, (2) animals, (3) objects, (4) environments, and/or (5) sounds—things they encounter in daily life that are often unavoidable. If your dog consistently reacts to at least three of these five categories, they may be experiencing global fear.
- **Generalized anxiety** is a more constant and pervasive type of anxiety that affects your dog across various environments and situations,

even without a specific trigger. Common signs include pacing, restlessness, hypervigilance, and difficulty settling down. Your dog might seem worried or nervous most of the time, even in familiar places or around familiar people. This type of anxiety doesn't always have a clear cause and may be worse in new or unfamiliar settings.

In short, global fears are specific fears to a variety of individual triggers. Generalized anxiety is more like a constant worry in most situations, regardless of the specifics.

### Timely Intervention

When your dog is overly fearful or anxious, their body is constantly in stress mode. This unfortunately can lead to other behavioral and physiological issues. If left untreated, fear and anxiety tend to get more severe over time, and changes begin to occur in the neurochemistry of your dog's brain making it more likely that your dog will generalize the fear or anxiety to other situations. Timely intervention is essential to ensure your dog's wellbeing and prevent escalation. Now is the perfect time to help your dog make positive change!

### Recognizing The Signs

Each dog expresses fear and anxiety in their own unique way, and it might even look different for your dog depending on the situation. You can download the [body language chart](#) in your Ease Pet Portal to help identify signs of fear and anxiety in your dog. Here are some common behaviors that indicate your dog might be feeling fearful or anxious:

### Signs of Fear and Anxiety

- "Flight" behaviors like running, hiding, or pulling away
- "Freeze" behaviors like refusing to move, laying down, moving slowly or stiffly
- "Fidget" behaviors like hypervigilance, looking around, pacing, climbing on or under things, inability to settle, destructive behavior, attention seeking, or pulling on leash
- Inability to respond to known cues
- Refusal to accept food or treats
- Excessive panting, lip licking, or drooling
- Barking, whining, or whimpering
- Trembling, shaking, or cowering
- Tucking tail and flattening ears
- Hair raised along the neck, back, or tail
- Dilated pupils (black center of the eye becomes larger)
- Attempting to escape or searching for an escape route

### Setting Objectives

Before diving into the action steps of this plan, let's set a shared goal: helping your dog become more confident and relaxed, gradually growing more comfortable with certain situations or stimuli. Together, we will support your dog in recovering more quickly from stressful events and strengthening their ability to stay calm. Remember the cumulative effects of fear and anxiety that we discussed earlier? We want to prevent those for your dog. So, every bit of progress, no matter how small, toward reducing fearful or anxious behavior is a win and makes a significant difference in your dog's overall wellbeing, both today and tomorrow.

## Expected Timeline

Treating your dog's fear and anxiety takes time and patience. After all, you're guiding your dog toward a more positive mindset, emotional state, and whole new set of behaviors! Follow this plan closely, and you should expect to see positive progress within **four to six weeks**. For some dogs with enduring or pronounced fear and anxiety, this timeline may be extended. Slow and steady progress wins the race against fear.

If your dog has other behavioral problems, like separation anxiety or fear of sounds or thunderstorms, each concern will require tailored professional help to achieve the best results. If this sounds like your dog, talk to your veterinarian about a separate referral to Ease or another qualified professional to address those issues too. Or contact Ease and we can help guide you on the next steps.

## Track Your Progress

As you work with your dog, it's helpful to maintain a [progress journal](#) detailing their reactions in both real life and training sessions to help identify patterns and progress. Jot down any factors that might influence your dog's behavior, such as location, reaction intensity, duration, environmental factors (e.g., people, other animals, noises, surface texture), and so forth. Take notes in whatever way works best for you.

Now, let's dive into the steps of the plan together.

### STEP 1: PARTNER WITH YOUR FAMILY VET

Your family veterinarian is an essential partner in your dog's behavior journey. Here are three important ways that your dog's primary care veterinarian can help support their progress:

#### A. Rule Our Physical Causes

Ease always recommends working with your veterinarian to rule out any physical issues that could be causing or contributing to your dog's behavior. For instance, ear infections and joint or muscle pain have been shown to worsen or even cause fear and anxiety. A physical exam, baseline lab work, and a pain assessment are good first steps to rule out physical causes.

We also suggest talking with your veterinarian about the most suitable, balanced, and nutritious diet for your dog. Just like with us humans, nutrition plays an important role in your dog's behavior by fostering optimal brain function, maintaining appropriate energy levels, facilitating stress management, and ensuring good digestive health.

#### B. Explore Medication

Anti-anxiety medication can play a key role in helping your dog feel calmer and more receptive to training, so we recommend discussing options with your family veterinarian early in this process. While Ease doesn't prescribe medication (primarily due to veterinary telemedicine laws), our specialists do work closely with your veterinarian to support their recommendations. We also will help you make informed decisions. In your Ease Pet Portal, you'll find expert [resources on medication](#), including FAQs and tips on talking with your vet. We'll also share key medication considerations throughout this plan.

#### C. Routine Follow-ups

Of course, maintaining your dog's good health is an ongoing effort. Always keep your veterinarian in the loop about important changes and trust your veterinarian to guide you on when it's time for a follow-up visit. For example, sometimes medication adjustments are necessary.

## STEP 2: CREATE A CALMING ENVIRONMENT

Next, let's focus on creating a calm environment for your dog. The goal here is to adjust their surroundings to minimize stress, so they're less prone to feeling fearful or anxious.

Just like many of us, dogs feel and learn best in calm, distraction-free settings. A stable, predictable home environment gives your dog a sense of safety, which builds confidence for handling more challenging situations. Daily stress can build up over time, amplifying your dog's anxiety. By managing daily stressors, you're not only creating a more relaxed atmosphere but also laying the groundwork for effective training. In short, a calm environment helps your dog feel and learn at their best!

### A. Recognizing Your Dog's Triggers

Environmental management means taking a thoughtful approach to identifying, understanding, and reducing things and situations that stress your dog. Effectively managing your dog's behavior starts with pinpointing with specificity their sources of stress. This involves recognizing specific triggers and understanding how different characteristics, settings, or contexts might impact your dog's reactions.

For example, your dog might be unbothered by a certain sound at home, but anxious when they hear the same sound elsewhere. Or your dog might seem comfortable during a walk in your familiar neighborhood but stressed during walks elsewhere. While fleeing and hiding are obvious signs of fear, try to spot signs of your dog's stress earlier on. These subtler signs will help you better identify your dog's specific triggers and address them proactively. The [body language chart](#) in your Pet Portal will come in handy here.

### Identifying Triggers: Early Signs

- Turning or looking at the direction of a trigger
- Pulling ears back tight or flattening them down
- Heightened alertness or easily startled reactions
- Dilated pupils or a furrowed brow
- Refusing treats or dropping them
- Sniffing the ground instead of eating treats
- Yawning, lip-licking, or panting
- Trembling or stiffness in their body

### B. Avoiding Your Dog's Triggers

Once you've identified your dog's triggers, you want to reduce exposure to them as much as possible. (Later in this plan, we'll work on gradual, controlled exposure to these triggers to help your dog build confidence.) While it may not be possible to avoid every trigger, finding creative ways to limit their impact can make a big difference. Here are some practical tips:

- **Manage In-Home Triggers.** If certain triggers are in your home, try to reduce their impact. For example, if your dog is afraid of the vacuum, you could have someone take your dog for a walk during cleaning or give them a special toy or long-lasting treat in a quiet place away from the noise, like the backyard or their sanctuary space (which we'll soon tell you how to set up). In Step 4 of this plan, we'll work on ways to reintroduce these situations in a controlled, positive way. For now, avoid them.
- **Plan Around Outside Triggers.** For triggers outside the home, try planning your activities to minimize exposure. For instance, if your dog is anxious about walking past a schoolyard while kids are outside playing, consider walks at a quieter time or take a different route.
- **Adapt Walks for Comfort.** If your dog is uneasy about urban walks, consider adjusting your routine. Choose quieter times of the day with

less traffic or opt for tranquil routes in less urban areas to ensure a more relaxed walking experience. It's okay to temporarily shorten or avoid walks altogether if needed to allow your dog's nervous system to reset. Provide activity and enrichment at home or in a secure yard to meet their exercise needs, if available and appropriate. We'll share more tips on urban walks later in this plan, too.

- **Anti-Anxiety Medication Consideration.** If it's challenging to avoid your dog's triggers despite your best efforts, and your dog's fear or anxiety is significantly affecting their quality of life, anti-anxiety medication is likely a reasonable and responsible option. Please discuss medication with your family veterinarian and visit the [medication resources](#) in your Ease Pet Portal for more guidance.

### Ways to Avoid Common Triggers

- Avoid high traffic parks with many people and dogs, both off and on leash
- Rent a private dog park (e.g., sniffspot.com)
- Avoid doggy day care and boarding
- Don't let your dog approach unfamiliar people and animals (and vice versa)
- Take walks during off-peak times
- Plan walking routes in low traffic areas
- Play with your dog in a securely fenced backyard
- Increase mental and physical enrichment in the home
- Cover windows and fences or gate off parts of your home or yard to limit visual access
- Avoid things that scare or provoke your dog
- Don't force your dog into social situations thinking they'll "get over it" with exposure

### C. Introduce Calm and Exploration

Adding moments of relaxation and exploration to your dog's daily routine can do wonders for

their well-being. Simple adjustments, like playing soothing background music throughout the day or giving your dog a long-lasting treat while you're occupied with your own daily tasks, can help create a calming atmosphere.

One of our favorite strategies is to replace traditional food bowls with food-dispensing toys or puzzle feeders, turning mealtime into a mentally stimulating activity for your dog. Start with simple toys that reward with treats for interaction, and then gradually introduce more complex puzzles to keep the challenge engaging. The key is to build your dog's confidence through success! Rotate these toys regularly to keep things fresh and exciting. If you have other pets, manage mealtime separately to avoid potential conflicts over these interactive food toys. For some great options, check out the [shopping list](#) in your Ease Pet Portal.

### D. Schedule Playtime and Social Interactions

Just like many of us, dogs like routine, and they love to have fun. Figure out what your dog enjoys doing, whether it be playing ball, lounging on the couch with you, or going hiking, and then provide routine and opportunities for your dog to do those activities. A dog who receives regular physical exercise, scheduled time for social interactions, and mental stimulation will be generally calmer and better equipped to cope with stressful situations. Here are some great ways to make sure your dog's needs are met throughout the day:

- **Consistent Routine.** As much as possible, offer your dog a consistent routine. Think of it as their daily planner. By setting consistent times for meals, walks, and play, you can help your dog know what to expect next. This comforts them and reduces anxiety and uncertainty.
- **Schedule Playtime.** Mornings and evenings are golden hours for bonding with you over

play. This could be something as simple as a game of fetch or a puzzle toy that challenges your dog’s mind. Try scheduling your dog’s playtime on your daily calendar, both as a reminder to you and to promote routine.

- **Stroll and Explore Together.** Assuming your dog is not afraid or overstimulated by walks, it’s hard to top a 5-to-10-minute leisurely walk with you twice a day. Use this time to explore a new path and take in different sceneries, all while avoiding their triggers whenever possible. It’s not just exercise; it’s a sensory adventure for your dog. Simply switching up your walking route keeps things interesting for your dog. To make environments, even neutral ones, a pleasant experience, periodically provide your dog with a treat for behaviors you like, such as glancing at you or walking calmly by your side.
- **Make Learning Fun.** Imagine if learning was always a game? For your dog, it can be! By using positive reinforcement with treats and toys, you can turn every lesson into a game. Whether it’s teaching them a new trick or reinforcing good behavior, these fun-filled sessions boost your dog’s skills and tighten the bond between you two. Remember, every time your dog associates learning with rewards, they’ll be even more eager to engage. A training session can be as short as 30 seconds or as long as 5 to 10 minutes if you and your dog are having fun. Later in this plan, we’ll cover in detail new skills to teach your dog.

**E. Adjust Your Interactions**

Sometimes, we unknowingly contribute to our dog’s anxiety or reactions. If you realize you’re accidentally doing something that might be causing your dog stress, it’s never late to adjust your approach. Our dogs are always learning, and so are we. Here are some considerations:

- **Please, No Punishment.** As the primary caregiver for your dog, you hold a crucial role in shaping their environment and experiences. Avoid resorting to punitive actions like yelling, yanking on the leash, putting your dog in isolation, or other punitive measures designed to cause discomfort and inhibit behaviors. This also includes using tools like choke chains, prong collars, shock collars, or “stim” collars. These methods not only fail to resolve the situation, they also can intensify your dog’s stress and harm the trust between you two.
- **Avoid Pressuring.** Don’t force your dog to confront what scares or provokes them with the intention of proving there’s “nothing to fear” or “they’ll get over it.” This will heighten their stress and make the situation worse.

**Ease Tip: Medication Consideration**

Should your dog become frightened, you can try offering them a small, appetizing dog treat to help create a positive association. If their anxiety is so heightened that they cannot accept the food treat, it’s a good indication to discuss anti-anxiety medication options (or adjustments) with your family veterinarian if you haven’t done so already. Visit the [medication resources](#) in your Pet Portal for more guidance.

- **Show Positive Behavior.** It’s important that you remain calm and positive. Your dog can sense your stress, which can increase their own anxiety. When needed, guide your dog by gently getting their attention and redirecting them to familiar, rewardable behaviors. In some cases, using a gentle leash can help.
- **Promote Independence.** If your dog seeks comfort when anxious by being near you, resist the urge to overly soothe them with

words or touch. Let your dog be close, and of course feel free to comfort them, but please keep things low key. While your presence can be reassuring, excessive comforting may hinder your dog’s ability to manage stress on their own. This can lead to codependency and heightened anxiety when you’re not present. Later in this plan, you’ll learn how to teach your dog alternative coping skills.

**F. Creating a Comfortable, Safe Space**

To protect your dog from their stress triggers, create a cozy and secure haven within your home. This dedicated space—called their “safe space” or “sanctuary space”—is a simple, affordable, and effective way to ease your dog’s fear and anxiety.

First, we’ll guide you on setting up a safe space. Later, we’ll explore training techniques to help your dog find their safe space independently when they are feeling overwhelmed. Use the [shopping list](#) in your Ease Pet Portal to find things to enhance your dog’s safe space. You certainly don’t need to buy everything (or even anything) on that list, but everything on it is curated by our experts to help guide you in your decision making.

Here are tips for setting up your dog’s safe space:

- **Choose a Great Spot.** Start by choosing a good spot for your dog’s safe space. Pick an area in your home that naturally reduces fear-inducing stimuli and where your dog feels comfortable. An interior room, walk-in closet, or a quiet bathroom without windows may be a good option. You can also follow your dog’s lead. Look for where your dog usually seeks refuge when they’re stressed—this can guide you to the right spot!
- **Mask Noises.** Help mask distressing noises with options like a white noise machine, the hum of a bathroom fan, specialized dog

relaxation audio (available on CDs and streaming platforms), or TV shows and classical music that your dog finds calming.

- **Minimize Visual Cues.** Visual signals can heighten your dog’s anxiety when they anticipate a subsequent unsettling event. For example, the mere sight of the vacuum cleaner can stress your dog long before it’s turned on. Lessen anxiety by comfortably getting your dog out of sight before getting the vacuum out of the closet.
- **Add Familiar Comforts.** Familiar items and comforting scents can provide a sense of security during stressful times. If your dog has a favorite blanket or bed, you can add it to their safe space. Interactive toys, like food puzzles or a Kong filled with frozen peanut butter, can be a great distraction. Consider also using calming pheromones (more on those below) or dog-friendly aromatherapy.
- **Keep It Safe.** Make sure their space is both comfortable and safe. For example, keep items out of reach that your dog might accidentally ingest, use durable and dog safe bedding and toys, and secure or remove cords that a stressed dog might chew on.
- **Maintain Easy Access.** Your dog should always be able to enter and leave their safe space freely, granting them autonomy and some control over their environment. Whether it’s a room or another spot, keep pathways clear for them to reach their safe space without help.

Remember, every dog is unique. While these steps offer a general guideline, always observe your dog’s preferences, and adjust their safe space accordingly to increase your dog’s comfort and peace of mind. You know your dog best, so have fun creating their safe and cozy haven!

## G. Plan Ahead

Proactive planning is a fantastic way to support your dog. Life gets busy, of course, but anticipating predictable situations that cause fear or anxiety, like storms, lawn maintenance or trash collection, helps you create a calm environment.

If your family veterinarian has prescribed event-based medications, administer them appropriately in advance. Negative memories can deeply affect your dog and exposing them to fear-inducing situations without medication can intensify their fear response. While situational medications usually work quickly, they still take about 30 to 60 minutes to fully take effect. Administer them before your dog displays any signs of fear or anxiety for the best results.

### Ease Tip: Medication Consideration

Event-based medications can be administered as needed before stressful situations such as unfamiliar guests, grooming appointments, or fireworks. They help your dog's nervous system and reduce anxiety levels. Visit the [medication resources](#) in your Ease Pet Portal for more guidance.

## H. Consider Complementary Therapies

There are lots of easy, complementary therapies to boost your dog's relaxation levels. Check out your [shopping list](#) for our top recommendations. You can use these calming aids on their own or even mix and match them, depending on what works best for your dog. Just make sure to follow the guidelines from the manufacturer. Here's what to explore:

- **Pheromones.** Like humans might gravitate toward a calming scent after a long day, our dogs have their own set of comforting smells. Dog-friendly pheromones that mimic the

calming scents released by a mother dog while nursing her puppies can help some dogs relax. Diffusers can be placed in areas of the home where your dog commonly spends time and in their designated safe space. Sprays and collars can be used on the go. Their manufacturers offer lots of tips for use.

- **Supplements.** Dog nutritional supplements can improve relaxation and overall wellness. It's important to choose supplements backed by scientific evidence and made with high-quality ingredients. Chat with your veterinarian to see if a specific supplement, often called a "nutraceutical," aligns well with your dog's unique needs—you can do this when you also talk to them about your dog's nutrition!
- **Anti-anxiety Garment.** An anti-anxiety garment, like a Thundershirt, Storm Defender cape, or similar product, may help your dog cope with fear and anxiety. The efficacy of most of these garments has not been studied; however, some dog owners report that they are helpful. Always monitor your dog when they are wearing it to make sure they remain comfortable and safe.

### Recap: Stress-Free Environment

Creating a low-stress environment for your dog improves their wellbeing and training. A key strategy involves minimizing your dog's exposure, as much as possible, to situations and things that trigger their anxiety or fear.

Once you've set up a low-stress environment for your dog, the next step involves helping your dog develop better coping skills during challenging situations with training.



### STEP 3: TEACH NEW SKILLS

Now that your dog has a calm, safe space, it's time to teach them new skills to more confidently handle stressful situations—especially those that cannot be avoided. Positive reinforcement training is key here, as it gives your dog constructive, enjoyable behaviors to focus on even when they might feel uneasy. By redirecting their attention from fear to engaging in something calming or even fun, you're helping them experience these situations in a more positive way.

While good environmental management can reduce many fear-inducing scenarios, some experiences, like car rides or outdoor bathroom breaks, are unavoidable. To help your dog feel more comfortable in these moments, they'll need specific coping skills. These skills will also be essential as you move on to Step 4 of this plan (desensitization and counterconditioning).

#### A. Overall Tips for Teaching New Skills

Please follow these general training whenever you are working with your dog and revisit them periodically to keep them top of mind. Be sure to also watch the [training videos](#) in your Ease Pet Portal - they're very helpful!

- **Gather Your Supplies.** For training, you'll want to have handy a dog training clicker (if using), small and tasty treats that your dog loves, and your dog's leash and collar or harness setup. These tools allow you to gently guide your dog's behavior and ensure safety during training. See your Ease [shopping list](#) for our training supply recommendations.
- **Short and Engaging Sessions.** Teach your dog new skills in brief, engaging sessions—2 minutes or less—and with tasty treats to reinforce desired behaviors. This keeps your dog enthusiastic about learning with you. You

can always build up your dog's stamina over time. Make training enjoyable for you both!

- **Practice Together.** Try to practice daily and multiple times per day. That said, always consider what you and your dog can handle that day. Once your dog has learned a specific skill, you can make it part of your daily routine, for example, by practicing that skill when giving your dog food or attaching the leash to their collar.
- **Use Clear Start and End Cues.** Set clear beginning and ending signals for training sessions. A start cue (like "Ready?") or a visual cue (like getting the treat bag), lets your dog know training is starting and opportunity for reinforcements exists. When ending, use an "All Done!" or "That's It!" cue and transition to an activity your dog loves, like independent play, access to a special toy, or a meal in a puzzle toy. Keep these cues consistent and aim to end on a positive note.
- **Start Calm and Controlled.** Start by teaching your dog new skills in a controlled and distraction-free setting where you both feel safe and calm. Ease recommends inside your quiet home to start.
- **Gradually Increase the Difficulty.** Take a step-by-step approach to ramping up the training difficulty. Always aim to keep your dog successful without pushing them. Below are some examples of mild distractions:
  - **Low-Level Noise.** Play soft background music, nature sounds like flowing water, or the TV at a low volume. Or have a familiar family member talk or walk by.
  - **Change in Environment.** Place novel objects nearby, such as an Amazon delivery box, new book, stuffed animal, or piece of furniture moved from its usual

location. This changes the environment just a little bit and allows you to practice skills with something different.

These are just a few examples of where to start; for a lot more helpful ideas on increasing training difficulty (including varying and layering distractions), please refer to the [supplemental handouts](#) in your Ease Pet Portal.

- **Move Outside Slowly.** If your dog can focus on you despite different distractions at home, then take things outdoors in a step-by-step manner. Start with the quiet backyard, then move to the front yard, a quiet cul-de-sac, your neighborhood during off-peak hours, and so forth. As you progress, you can similarly increase the distractions outside while still avoiding your dog's triggers.
- **Make Rewards Special.** Use higher-value treats for more distracting situations to create positive associations. Ease likes using high quality dog treats and very small bits of hotdog, plain boiled chicken, or cheese to reinforce behaviors. You can store treats in a treat bag for easy access during training.
- **Use Treats Wisely.** Avoid linking specific treats to stress by using them only during challenging situations. When only associated with situations of fear, anxiety, or stress, it can make these treats unappealing. Practice skills in relaxed settings before using them in slightly tougher scenarios to keep treats enjoyable and effective for training.
- **Let Your Dog Set the Pace.** Always allow your dog to set the training pace. If they show signs of fear, stress, or disinterest, simply step back to a previous level, offer breaks, or end the training session. To help recognize your dog's stress signs, please refer to the [body language chart](#) in your Ease Pet Portal. Try to remember

that setbacks are a natural part of your dog's learning, too. Progress likely won't be linear.

- **Sequence Matters.** As you progress through Section 3 of this plan, each new skill is important, and so is the order you introduce them. Go in order and watch for signs your dog has grasped a specific skill before advancing to the next skill, such as:
  - **Consistent Response.** Your dog consistently and correctly responds to your cues, quickly adjusting if they make a mistake.
  - **Focus and Engagement.** Your dog remains attentive, calm, relaxed, and motivated to work with you during training.
  - **Generalization.** Your dog can successfully apply the skill in diverse situations. This means in different locations (for example, various rooms in your home, the backyard, and a quiet street) and with diverse distractions (for example, low-level noises, new scents, and other mild environmental changes).

### Ease Tip: Assessing Readiness

In this plan, whenever we talk about your dog "consistently" demonstrating a skill or behavior, it means your dog reliably shows a specific skill or behavior in most situations, typically 80% or more of the time. This is akin to a solid "B" grade on a test! The exact percentage isn't the focus, so don't dwell on it. What matters is your dog's consistent performance of the desired behavior, not just in occasional instances or specific scenarios. This indicates a deep understanding of expectations, with your dog skillfully

navigating distractions and simulated scenarios with ease.

- **Have Fun.** Finally, and perhaps above all else, try to have fun! As you work with your dog, relapses are to be expected. Don't be hard on yourself or your dog when they happen. You're helping your dog learn a completely new way of thinking, feeling, and behaving, and this takes time. Keep the process gradual and enjoyable for both you and your dog.

Please also refer to the [training handouts](#) in your Ease Pet Portal for more insights on evaluating your dog's readiness to advance in training.

Now, with these general tips in mind, let's start training.

## B. Teach Two Positive Event Marker Signals

Start first by teaching your dog two "positive event marker signals." These are cues that tell your dog that they've done something right, and a reward is coming. The most common positive event marker is a clicker, but you can also use a verbal cue like, "Yes!" Whichever marker is the most comfortable for you is okay to use. The key is to be consistent in using the marker and to follow it up with a reward, such as tasty treats.

For this plan, Ease recommends teaching two positive event marker signals: (1) a unique sound, such as a click from a clicker tool, and (2) a word, such as "Yes!". Watch the [training videos](#) in your Ease Pet Portal to learn how to teach your dog these two positive event marker signals:

1. Click
2. "Yes!"

**When to Advance in Training:** Keep practicing until your dog has a firm grasp of their marker signals. Your dog should show enthusiasm and

anticipation when they hear a marker signal and appear confident and engaged during training in various settings. You want them to understand the connection between the marker and the reward. Once your dog consistently demonstrates their two marker signals - great job! This creates a strong foundation and means that you're ready to proceed to the next section.

## C. Teach Three Markable Moments

Now that your dog clearly understands their two marker signals, let's move on to introduce three "markable moments":

1. Offered Attention
2. Noticing Distractions
3. Responding to Known Cues

These skills will help your dog stay focused on you and change the way they feel about their triggers. Make sure your dog becomes good at one skill before moving on to the next. Watch how to teach your dog three markable moments with the [training videos](#) in your Pet Portal, and here's some written instruction too:

1. **Offered Attention.** This skill means that your dog chooses to pay attention to you because it's reinforcing, rather than because they are responding to a specific cue. Unlike situations when you explicitly ask your dog to perform a specific cue (like "Sit" or "Stay"), offered attention is more spontaneous. Offered attention is valuable because if your dog is actively engaged with you, they are more likely to ignore environmental distractions. Visit your Pet Portal for [video instruction](#), and here's how:

- As soon as your dog naturally directs their attention to you without any prompting or cues from you, mark their behavior with a click or a verbal event marker (such as "Yes!"), followed by a treat. This reinforces

the idea that offering attention to you is a good thing and worthy of a treat.

- Do not use any verbal cues (such as “Watch Me”) or physical cues (such as clapping or leash tension) to prompt your dog. Allow your dog to naturally offer focus on you without being prompted.
- Keep practicing with your dog, gradually increasing the level of challenge by introducing various controllable distractions, trying different locations, varying the times of day, and so forth.

2. **Noticing Distractions.** Calmly noticing distractions is an important foundational skill, as it allows your dog to become more comfortable in different situations and promotes a positive and confident attitude toward the world around them. Watch the [training video](#) in your Pet Portal to learn more, and here’s how:

- Your dog, like all dogs, naturally notices things and changes in their environment. The moment your dog notices a distraction, such as a person or a novel object, and remains calm, mark their good behavior with a click or verbal cue (such as “Yes!”), then reward your dog with a treat. This reinforces the idea that noticing distractions (eventually including their fear or anxiety triggers later in this plan) and maintaining composure in their presence is a desirable and rewarding behavior.
- You can reward your dog for noticing a distraction even if they are not their most calm. This early stage of recognition is considerable progress! Over time and with practice, you can refine your training to reward even calmer responses.

- However, if your dog notices a distraction and seems fearful or anxious, the primary focus should be on briskly guiding them out of the situation. There is nothing good for your dog to learn by remaining in a fearful scenario.
- Keep practicing with your dog, gradually increasing the level of challenge by introducing various controllable distractions, trying different locations, varying the times of day, and so forth.

3. **Responding to Known Cues.** The aim with this skill is to make responding to known cues a positive and rewarding experience for your dog. For example, if your dog has been trained to sit when you say “Sit,” or target your hand with their nose when you say, “Touch,” those are your dog’s known cues. Visit your Pet Portal for [video instruction](#), and here’s how:

- Whenever your dog correctly performs a known cue (such as “Sit”), use a click or verbal “Yes!” marker to signal completion of the behavior, and then reward them with a treat. Your dog learns to associate these cues with rewards, making them more likely to respond.
- Avoid requesting these cues when your dog is already distracted by something else or in a situation where they are more likely to ignore your cues. Competing motivation reduces your chance of a successful response. You want your dog to build confidence through success!
- Keep practicing with your dog, gradually increasing the level of challenge by introducing various controllable distractions, trying different locations, varying the times of day, and so forth.

**When to Advance in Training:** Keep up the great work by continuing to practice with your dog these three markable moments: (1) Offered Attention, (2) Noticing Distractions, and (3) Responding to Known Cues. As your dog calmly notices distractions, voluntarily offers you attention, and remains motivated to work with you, even in different locations with various distractions, you can move on to the next set of skills. Remember to keep practicing everything your dog has learned so far to keep their skills sharp. Continue to avoid your dog's triggers, as these are not mild distractions for your dog.

### Ease Tip: Medication Consideration

As you progress through training, if you're having a hard time teaching your dog new skills inside your home, or your dog continues to struggle just outside your home, it's probably time to discuss medication (or medication adjustments) with your family veterinarian. Visit your Ease Pet Portal for [additional guidance](#) on this topic.

#### D. Teach Three Management Skills

Now that your dog understands their two marker signals and three markable moments, it's time to teach your dog three "management skills":

1. "Let's Go"
2. "Touch" or Food Lure
3. "Find It"

These skills will help you guide your dog out of challenging situations and manage their reactions. As a reminder, start by teaching these management skills in a calm, controlled, distraction-free setting (like inside your home) when both you and your dog are feeling safe and calm. Continue to gradually increase the challenge over multiple training sessions, just as

you've done in your previous training. Visit your Ease Pet Portal for [helpful video learning](#), and here's how:

1. **Let's Go.** This skill helps redirect your dog's attention and change their focus quickly. It allows you to guide your dog away from potential triggers or situations that might lead to fear or anxiety. By teaching your dog to respond promptly to your cues to change direction while keeping the leash loose, you can prevent or diffuse fearful scenarios. Watch the [training video](#) in your Ease Pet Portal, and here's how:

- **Set the Stage.** Make sure your dog is comfortable and not distracted in a quiet training location. Begin walking with your dog on a loose leash so that you're not using leash pressure to guide your dog. (Tip: encourage your dog's good behavior by marking and offering them a treat when they maintain slack in the leash, gradually reinforcing the loose-leash walking behavior.)
- **Cue and Reward.** Promptly change direction by saying, "Let's Go!" (or another cue of your choice, just keep it consistent) and gently guide your dog to change direction by patting your leg or making an upbeat kissy sound. Reward your dog with treats and praise as your dog starts to follow your cue and change direction.
- **Increase Difficulty and Generalize.** As your dog becomes good at responding to your cues, gradually increase the difficulty by introducing mild controllable distractions or by cueing in different places in your home or quiet yard. This helps your dog generalize the skill, making them more responsive in different

situations. For further guidance, refer to the [training handouts](#) in your Pet Portal.

2. **Touch or Food Lure.** A target behavior skill, like “Touch” or Food Lure, is versatile and can serve multiple purposes. It allows you to redirect your dog’s attention from triggers, and it can be used for recall. Train your dog to touch their nose to your hand when cued or to come to or follow your hand in exchange for a treat. Visit the [training videos](#) in your Ease Pet Portal for detailed instructions on how to teach your dog both “Touch” and Food Lure. Here’s also written instruction:

- **Set the Stage.** Begin by holding a treat in your hand or extending your empty hand for your dog to touch. Place your hand just a few inches from your dog’s nose. As soon as your dog touches your hand with their nose, use your event marker (clicker or “Yes!”) and then reward them with a treat to reinforce the desired behavior.
- **Cue and Reward.** Once your dog is eagerly offering to touch your hand when presented, use a cue like “Touch” just before you present your hand. If your dog responds, mark (with a verbal cue like “Yes!” or clicker) and reward with a treat.
- **Increase Difficulty and Generalize.** As your dog becomes better at responding to your cues, increase the difficulty gradually. You can do this by increasing the distance between you and your dog, introducing mild and controllable distractions, or by varying the location. This helps your dog generalize the skill, making them more responsive in different situations.

### A Word of Caution

If your dog tends to redirect frustration by biting objects nearby, such as their leash or other items, DO NOT use “Touch” or Food Lure when your dog is agitated. In such cases, there’s a risk that they might nip or bite your hand instead of gently touching it. Instead, focus on teaching and using the other skills.

3. **Find It.** Teach your dog to chase and retrieve a treat that you’ve rolled on the ground. This can serve as a distraction technique when encountering triggers. This skill is particularly helpful for dogs displaying mouthiness or snatching treats (indicating high arousal and stress). Simply say, “Find It,” and toss a treat where you want your dog to go. Let them find the treat and eat it. Voila, that’s it! Gradually increase the difficulty by introducing mild controllable distractions or by cueing in different locations. This helps your dog generalize the skill, making them more responsive in different situations.

**When to Advance in Training:** Once your dog consistently demonstrates (as a reminder, at least 80% of the time) their three management skills ((1) “Let’s Go,” (2) “Touch” or Food Lure, and (3) “Find It”), even amidst diverse settings and controllable distractions, you can advance in your training. Remember to continue to regularly practice all the skills your dog has learned, and to continue to avoid your dog’s triggers until they are controllably introduced later in this plan.

### E. Teach a Mobile Zen Mat

Now it’s time to teach your dog to relax on a portable “Zen mat” that can go wherever they do. This simple strategy creates a portable sense of safety. Here’s a step-by-step guide, and watch an

Ease expert demonstrate this concept in your [video training library](#) too:

- **Choose a Mat.** Choose a specific item, like a blanket, mat, towel, or even a small silicone trivet that’s easy to take with you. Your dog’s entire body can, but doesn’t need to, fit on it—it’s just a consistent target that signals relaxation. For best results, use the mat exclusively during training sessions, picking it up when training is done.
- **Introduce the Mat.** Place the mat on the floor with a few treats on it. Let your dog approach and enjoy the treats.
- **Look for Relaxation Behaviors.** Watch for signs that your dog is relaxing, such as lying down, resting their head, or rolling onto their side. Calmly reward these behaviors by placing a treat on the mat. If your dog becomes anxious or restless, end the session and make training easier next time. Signs of discomfort include ears back, tail down, looking around, yawning, lip licking, or avoiding your cues, treats, or toys.
- **Add a Cue (Optional).** Try introducing a cue, like “Go Settle,” just before placing the mat down, helping your dog associate the mat with relaxing. Immediately reward them calmly with treats, a food puzzle toy, or praise upon complying with the cue. Over time, your dog should respond to the verbal cue.
- **Extend Time Gradually.** Practice for just a couple minutes initially. As your dog becomes more comfortable staying on the mat, increase the time they spend relaxing before calmly rewarding them. Gradually extend the duration on the mat, too. Be sure to mix up the intervals so the time doesn’t always get longer and longer.
- **Practice with a Leash:** Since your dog will often be on a leash in different environments, practicing with the leash on at home helps them get used to this scenario. Incorporate their usual leash/harness setup into training sessions.
- **Reward Strategically.** Use high value treats and rewards to make the Zen mat an extra-special spot for your dog. For example, offer a food-stuffed toy while they’re on the mat.
- **End on a Positive Note.** When training is complete, roll up the mat to signal the session’s end, using an “All Done!” (or similar) cue. Redirect your dog to another enjoyable activity, like playing with a favorite toy, going outside, or taking a walk. They’ve just worked hard, so reward them!
- **Vary Locations:** Train in multiple locations at home and in relaxed settings. Aim to practice in at least 10 different places to help your dog generalize their Zen mat skills before using it in environments that may trigger fear.
- **Combine with Safe/Sanctuary Space:** Use the Zen mat within your dog’s safe or sanctuary space (the one you set up earlier in Step 2, Section F of this plan) to reinforce its role as a comfort tool. By this point, your dog would be confident in their ability to settle on the Zen mat, making the transition a smooth one.
- **Practice.** Train regularly, ideally several times a week, to reinforce the positive link between their mat and relaxation. Short, frequent sessions (2 - 5 minutes) are usually most effective, but these can lengthen as your dog increases their stamina.

Training your dog to relax on a Zen mat, with or without a verbal cue, and generalizing it across various environments provides a valuable tool for comfort during stressful situations. Eventually,

you can use the Zen mat in a variety of settings, including on the go. For example, you might use the Zen mat at home during stressful events like a visitor arriving or a noisy activity, at the veterinarian’s office to provide a sense of security, in new environments like a friend’s house or outdoor settings, while traveling, or as a calming spot before anticipated and unavoidable exposure to a fear trigger.

### Recap: New Skills for Better Coping

The skills that we’ve focused on thus far are crucial building blocks for your dog’s overall behavior. By first focusing on these core abilities, you build a solid training foundation that makes other training techniques more effective. Mastery of your dog’s foundational skills, of course, doesn’t mean that your dog will never be fearful, anxious, or distracted; however, this step-by-step approach will help your dog gradually become more comfortable and improve their behavior in real-life situations. Advanced training is deep mastery of the fundamentals!

**When to Advance in Training:** The foundational techniques in Step 3 are very important (and necessary for success later in this plan), so take the time to really master them. Only progress to Step 4 once:

- Your dog’s safe space is successfully established.
- Your dog consistently demonstrates (80% of the time) their 3 markable moments (Offered Attention, Noticing Distractions, and Responding to Known Cues).
- Your dog consistently demonstrates their 3 management skills (Let’s Go, Touch or Food Lure, and Find It).

- Your dog is comfortable and relaxed on their Zen mat.

As a reminder, aim for consistency across diverse settings and manageable distractions. Continue practicing all skills regularly to reinforce your dog’s progress.

### STEP 4: DESENSITIZE AND COUNTERCONDITION (OPTIONAL)

Many dogs can successfully manage their fears with just the techniques from the earlier steps. Step 4 is entirely **optional** if you’re happy with your dog’s progress so far!

For those looking to go further, desensitization and counterconditioning (DS & CC) work by gradually exposing your dog to a mild version of an unsettling stimulus—whether it’s an object, person, animal, or environment—while rewarding them with tasty treats to positively reshape their emotional response.

Sometimes, DS & CC may not be feasible, even if you’re eager to progress, as it requires specific conditions. Before moving forward, consider whether you can meet these essential criteria for successful DS & CC:

### Key Criteria for DS & CC

To desensitize effectively, you must be able to:

- Clearly identify the specific trigger causing your dog’s fear or anxiety.
- Recreate the triggering situation in a controlled and predictable way.
- Determine a starting point where your dog still feels comfortable around the trigger (this means still accepting treats without showing signs of stress).



- Control the intensity of the trigger, making sure it doesn't occur unexpectedly or randomly.

Lastly, DS & CC can be time-consuming and risky if not done correctly. For this reason, Ease strongly recommends partnering with an experienced positive reinforcement animal trainer, who will help you keep your dog calm and confident without unintentionally reinforcing fear or adding stress. You'll find recommendations for local trainers in the [local support handout](#) in your Pet Portal. You're also welcome to reach out to Ease for guidance in connecting with professionals near you.

### A. Pinpoint Stimulus Specifics

To begin, it's important to identify the specific details that trigger your dog's fear or anxiety. Let's build upon our work earlier in this plan and get even more precise!

#### Example: Fear of Walks

For example, let's say your dog shows fear about going for walks. Here's how you can break down this situation in detail:

- **Observe.** Start by watching your dog's behavior as you prepare for a walk. Notice when their stress first appears. Is it when you reach for the leash? When they hear the jingle of the collar or harness? When you put on your shoes? When you open the door or approach the sidewalk? When you pass a specific spot outside?
- **Get Specific.** Perhaps your dog is fine when you pick up the leash but begins to pace when they hear the collar jingle. Or maybe they're calm until you approach the door, and then they begin to pull back. Pinpointing these reactions will help you understand

exactly which parts of the routine are most distressing.

### Common Stimulus Considerations

Things to consider about the stimulus or situation:

- Proximity and location (e.g., 50 vs. 25 feet away, in the home, on a walk, in the car)
- Sound (type) and volume (quiet or loud)
- Movement (stationary or moving)
- Features of people: familiarity, gender, age, ethnicity, gait, clothing (mask, hat, glasses), eye contact or ignoring, etc.
- Features of animals: species, coat color, breed, familiarity, eye contact, etc.
- Features of objects: size, shape, color, familiarity, etc.

The more detailed and comprehensive you can be in identifying these considerations, the better prepared you'll be to guide your dog through each step of desensitization.

Try to identify and jot down as many details and characteristics of your dog's triggers as you can. Download the [desensitization hierarchy handout](#) in the Pet Portal to help guide you.

### B. Determine a Non-Stressful Starting Point

Next, identify a non-stressful starting point where your dog can comfortably be exposed to the triggering stimulus or situation—this means when your dog is comfortable enough to accept treats. This starting point should be low enough in intensity that your dog feels safe but aware of the trigger, allowing you to gradually increase exposure over time. Here are some tips for finding a non-stressful starting point:

- **Observe Body Language.** Look for signs that your dog is relaxed, like a loose tail, soft eyes, and a willing response to treats. For example, you might start small by showing your dog the leash without moving toward the door and see if your dog stays relaxed.
- **Adjust the Distance or Intensity.** If your dog shows any stress (like lip licking, whining, or turning away), take a step back. For example, if holding the leash causes tension, try placing the leash on the floor at a distance away until your dog is comfortable.
- **Stay Neutral.** Keep your movements and tone calm to avoid signaling excitement or tension, which can affect your dog's response.

Once identified, this non-stressful starting point will serve as the foundation for your desensitization work.

### C. Create Desensitization Hierarchies and Plan

Now, you're ready to create a desensitization plan. Continue to use the [Desensitization Hierarchy](#) handout to guide you, and here's how:

- **List Characteristics in Order.** Arrange the characteristics from least stressful to most stressful for your dog. Place the starting point at the top (the non-stressful starting point) and the final goal (the most challenging version) at the bottom.
- **Add Micro-Steps.** Break down each characteristic into small, manageable steps. These intermediate "micro-steps" will help you introduce each aspect gradually, across multiple sessions and over several days or weeks.

#### Example: Fear of Walks

##### Seeing the leash (mild stress)

- Place the leash across the room.
- Gradually position the leash closer.

- Progress to holding it briefly, then longer.

##### Hearing collar jingle (moderate stress)

- Softly jingle the collar from a distance.
- Gradually increase the volume and duration.
- Shorten the distance by moving it closer.

##### Putting on your shoes (higher stress)

- Touch your shoes in front of your dog.
- Put one shoe on, then both.
- Walk a few steps while wearing the shoes.

##### Opening the door (high stress)

- Approach and touch the door handle.
- Gradually turn the handle.
- Open the door slightly.
- Work up to a fully open door.

##### Stepping outside (highest stress)

- Step outside briefly, then immediately return.
- Slowly increase the time you spend outside.
- Step further away each time.

And so forth. In building this plan, you will create a roadmap for how you will start to desensitize your dog by introducing the mildest characteristics first and helping your dog become gradually comfortable with each progressive micro-step.

#### Example: Fear of the Vacuum Cleaner

Here's an even more detailed example for a dog who is fearful of the vacuum cleaner. In this example, noise is the most stressful factor, followed by movement, and then proximity of a person near the vacuum.

- **Non-Stressful Starting Point.** Vacuum is 10 feet away, off, and stationary, with no person nearby.
- **What to Do:** Show the vacuum at this distance. Give your dog a treat if they remain calm and take the treat easily.

- **Repeat.** Practice daily with 2 - 3 short sessions (2 - 3 minutes each) over a period of 2 - 3 days.

- **Move Forward.** Progress if your dog stays relaxed, willingly takes treats, and doesn't show signs of stress (like turning away, lip licking, or whining) in several sessions. Once they're comfortable, proceed to the next step, and so forth.

- **Next Steps:**

1. Person near vacuum, off, and still at 20+ feet:
  - Outside
  - In another room
  - In the same room

\*Repeat as above, rewarding calm behavior.

2. Person near vacuum, off, and still within 20 feet:
  - Outside
  - In another room
  - In the same room

3. Movement of vacuum by person at 20+ feet, vacuum off:
  - Outside
  - In another room
  - In the same room

\*Repeat as above, rewarding calm behavior.

4. Movement of within 20 feet, vacuum off:
  - Outside
  - In another room
  - In the same room

\*Repeat as above, rewarding calm behavior.

5. Nose only (vacuum on, no movement) at 20+ feet (with and without a person):
  - Outside
  - In another room
  - In the same room

\*Repeat as above, rewarding calm behavior.

6. Movement and noise of vacuum, on, at 20+ feet:
  - Outside
  - In another room
  - In the same room

\*Repeat as above, rewarding calm behavior.

7. Movement and noise of vacuum, on, within 20 feet:
  - Outside
  - In another room
  - In the same room

\*Gradually reduce distance, rewarding each calm response until your dog is comfortable with the vacuum closer.

### Ease Tip: Go Slow to Go Fast

The goal is steady, stress-free progress without triggering unwanted behaviors. Remember, the smaller the steps toward your goal, the faster progress you and your dog will make!

### D. Add Positive Associations to Triggers

Once you have your plan, you can begin counterconditioning by pairing each micro-step with very tasty treats to create positive associations. This gradual approach helps shift your dog's emotional response, making each aspect of the routine feel safe and rewarding.

Start with the least stressful exposure and work step-by-step through each micro-step until you reach your final goal. Proceed through each micro-step individually to help your dog gradually build comfort. As your dog builds their confidence, you can then gradually combine steps until they feel more at ease with the entire

routine. In other words, initially only change one aspect of the challenge at a time.

For instance, in helping a dog overcome the fear of the vacuum cleaner in our prior example, the key is to start with the vacuum in a non-threatening, silent way, then gradually increase exposure to its (1) proximity, (2) movement, and eventually (3) noise over time.

### Example: Fear of Walks

- **Non-Stressful Starting Point.** Begin at a low-stress level, such as placing the leash across the room. Reward your dog immediately with high-value treats, like small pieces of cheese or chicken, as soon as they notice it. Practice daily over 2 - 3 short sessions (2 - 3 minutes each) over a period of 2 - 3 days.
- **Observe Comfort Level.** Watch for signs of relaxation, including whether your dog continues to take treats. If you see signs of stress, take a step back and pause or end the session.
- **Gradual Progression.** Once your dog is consistently comfortable seeing the leash at a distance, progress to the next step in the sequence, like positioning the leash closer. Repeat each step over several short sessions rewarding each time to create positive associations. Continue practicing for a few days or until your dog shows no signs of stress.
- **Practice Gradual Exposure.** Continue this progression, introducing one aspect at a time and slowly combining characteristics as your dog grows more at ease. Move patiently at a pace that keeps your dog comfortable, reinforcing with treats until they are comfortable with the entire routine and/or the final goal.

### Ease Tip: Assessing Progress

If your dog ever refuses to eat treats or tries to hide, it's a clear indication that the training has advanced too rapidly. In such cases, consider what you're about to do and **reduce it by 50%**. Always aim to conclude training sessions before your dog becomes fatigued or anxious, with most sessions lasting only a couple minutes.

### E. Tips for Success

To help your dog feel safe and make steady progress, follow these tips:

- **Timing:** Move to the next micro-level only when your dog is calm and comfortable.
- **Reward Quickly:** Reinforce positive associations by rewarding your dog with treats immediately after the triggering characteristic. Use high value treats (tasty treats that your dog really likes) to reinforce calm behavior.
- **Go Gradually.** Make each increase small and manageable. Smaller steps lead to faster, more reliable progress.
- **Adjust One Factor at a Time.** Change only one aspect (e.g., distance **or** noise) per step to prevent overwhelming your dog. Gradually increase each characteristic individually, not simultaneously.
- **Balance Intensity.** When you add intensity in one area (like noise or movement), you may need to temporarily reduce intensity in another (like distance) to keep your dog comfortable.
- **Keep Sessions Short.** Keep training sessions short to avoid overwhelming your dog. Aim to end on a positive note while your dog is still relaxed.

- **Progress Without Stress.** Stop if your dog shows signs of fear or anxiety. Take breaks and try again at easier level next time.
- **Reduce by Half.** If your dog seems stressed, dial back the problematic step by 50% to go even more gradually.
- **Consider Clicker Training.** A clicker can be an effective tool to reinforce positive emotional responses and support systematic desensitization.
- **Consider Medication.** If you've been working patiently with your dog and their anxiety is still so heightened that they cannot accept treats, it's a good indication to discuss anti-anxiety medication (or medication adjustments) with your family veterinarian if you haven't done so already.

### Recap: DS & CC

Desensitization and counterconditioning work together to help your dog become more comfortable when exposed to their triggers in real-world scenarios. These techniques are optional because they require patience, consistency, and intensity management to ensure your dog's progress and well-being.

### Applying Training to Real-Life

While much of your dog's training has focused on training at home and in controlled environments, it's important to recognize that these techniques can be applied effectively in diverse real-life situations. Eventually, your dog will encounter real-life situations involving fear-inducing objects, people, sounds, environments, or animals. When this happens, you'll be well prepared:

- **Use Practiced Techniques.** During real-life events, rely on the techniques you've practiced, including your three markable behaviors, the Zen mat and safe space, and your three management strategies. If prescribed, administer medication in advance to help manage stress.
- **Portable Zen Mat.** Remember the Zen mat is portable! You can bring your dog's Zen mat with you to help your dog feel more secure in unfamiliar settings. Use the same stress-reduction techniques, such as adjusting lighting or checking weather conditions, as well as calming aids like pheromone sprays or collars when you venture out.
- **Positive Associations.** Encourage positive associations with new environments. Offer treats, toys, or affection when your dog is using their portable Zen mat or when they show calm behavior in unfamiliar places. This reinforces the idea that new settings can be enjoyable and safe.
- **Routine and Predictability.** Try to maintain a consistent routine, even when elsewhere. Dogs often find comfort in predictability, so sticking to familiar feeding and walking schedules can help reduce anxiety in unfamiliar environments.
- **Monitor and Adjust.** Continuously monitor your dog's behavior and comfort levels when you're out and about. Be prepared to adjust your day if your dog appears anxious or stressed.
- **Gradual Reduction.** As your dog becomes more confident and independent in real-life scenarios, you can gradually reduce the frequency of training sessions. Initially, practice regularly, but as your dog becomes more proficient, you can slowly space them out.

- **Maintain Progress.** Occasionally reward your dog during non-stressful times to help them maintain their confidence and skills. Watch for signs of regression, and revisit training as needed to keep their progress on track.

## Tips for Walks

Understandably, your dog's triggers may be hard to avoid while on walks, especially if you live in an urban environment. If your dog is fearful during walks, consider these practical tips:

- **Use a Secure Leash.** Make sure your dog is properly leashed, and ideally comfortably harnessed, to prevent them from bolting or escaping. Ease recommends using a sturdy 4-to-6-foot leash and a comfortable and well-fitting harness, which provides better control while also allowing your dog to comfortably explore. Check out your Ease [shopping list](#) for some of our favorite gear recommendations.
- **Choose Calm Starting Point.** Allow your dog to begin the walk in a calm state of mind. Start your walk in a quiet and familiar area, away from noisy streets or crowded places, if possible. Scheduling walks during off-peak times can help too.
- **Desensitization.** Try to generalize your dog's training outside. Start with quieter, more distant triggers and gradually up the challenge, so long as your dog remains comfortable. (Trigger avoidance is great too!)
- **Positively Reinforce.** Praise and treat your dog when they exhibit calm behavior on walks. Reward them for remaining composed in the presence of unexpected triggers. Every time your dog alerts to a trigger (ears or head orient in the direction of it) give your dog a treat.
- **Stay Attuned to Your Dog.** Pay close attention to your dog's body language. If they display

signs of distress, move to quieter areas if possible or leave the situation.

- **End on a Positive Note.** Conclude the walk on a positive note by returning to a serene location. Offer treats throughout to reinforce the idea that walks are enjoyable and safe experiences. Keep practicing and with patience, consistency, and positive reinforcement, you can help your dog enjoy stress-free walks!
- **Alternatives.** Remember, there are lots of ways to offer your dog exercise and enrichment, as highlighted earlier in this plan. Don't be afraid to pause or switch things up if your dog finds current activities stressful.

## Celebrate Every Step Forward

Your commitment to helping your dog is the first big step forward. As you progress through this plan, watch for these other positive changes:

- **Reduced Stress Indicators.** Over time, you may notice fewer signs of stress. Your dog might stay calm before anticipated triggering events and recover more quickly after stress. These are great signs!
- **Improved Relaxation.** Look for signs of increased relaxation, such as reduced panting, drooling, or pacing. A calm demeanor, engagement with toys, and continued eating around triggers indicate progress. Similarly, if your dog stays out in the open, showing curiosity about a situation instead of hiding, it signifies their growing confidence.
- **Training and Safe Spaces.** Progress can also be measured through training and the use of safe spaces. If your dog listens to your cues and follows them promptly, especially during stressful situations, it's a testament to their training success. If your dog starts to self

soothe by going to their designated safe space, it's a significant milestone!

- **Feedback.** Pay attention to your own feelings, as increased confidence and peace of mind indicate that your efforts are paying off. Also take note of observations from others, such as neighbors and dog sitters, who may notice reduced signs of fear and anxiety in your dog when you're not around.

Remember, progress is a journey, and celebrating these positive changes motivates both you and your dog forward.

### Seeking Additional Support

Our team of dog behavior experts crafted this science-backed plan, and it offers an excellent foundation. When you follow it, you'll see great improvements in your dog's behavior. That said, it may not cover every aspect of your dog's situation. Always seek extra guidance when you need a more targeted approach. Continue to follow this plan until you can be seen in person.

#### When to Ask for Help

While it's normal to experience ups and downs, here are some signs that it might be time to seek out additional professional help:

- **Prioritizing Safety.** If your dog's behavior raises concerns about potential harm to themselves or poses risks to others, contact a board-certified veterinary behaviorist for in-person support. Their specialized expertise ensures your dog receives timely and appropriate care, ensuring the safety of everyone involved.
- **Concerns When Left Alone.** If your dog shows signs of fear, anxiety, or panic when left alone or with thunderstorms or other sounds, consult your family veterinarian about a referral to Ease or another qualified expert. Many dogs who experience fear and anxiety with objects

and environments also develop fear or anxiety related to being left alone or with thunderstorms or noises.

- **Evaluating Progress.** If challenges persist, especially in the early stages of training, or minimal improvements occur despite adhering to this plan, please discuss medication (or medication adjustments) with your family veterinarian or consider additional tailored guidance from a board-certified veterinary behaviorist.
- **Symptom Intensity.** Intensified behaviors or adverse effects on your dog's overall health warrant professional consultation with your family veterinarian.
- **Soliciting Specialized Support.** Addressing fear and anxiety is a process, and it's entirely natural to occasionally feel out of your depth, especially when confronted with unavoidable situations. Seek additional help from a trusted professional dog trainer if you ever feel overwhelmed, uncertain about the next steps, or in need of guidance on correct training techniques.

Behavioral issues like this are complex and multifaceted. Seeking support is a proactive step! Visit your Ease Pet Portal for a [local resources handout](#) with tips on locating behavior professionals near you.

### You've Got This!

With this plan, you're embarking on a journey of positive change with your dog. Print it out, grab a pen, and get ready to check off steps as you make progress. Take things one step at a time and celebrate every victory along the way. Stay positive, stay patient, and keep the bond with your dog strong as you work toward a more relaxed life together!