

Worried about Strangers?

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Does your dog get worried around strangers? Many dogs do. But often, it's not the strangers themselves that these dogs are worried about; it is the fact that we are going to ask them to interact with those strangers that worries them. Why do we expect our dogs to act open and happy with everyone they meet? Do we act that way with everyone we meet?

Do you always stand very close to people you don't know or do you try to keep some space between yourself and them? Do you want strangers to come touch you and hug you? Are there some people that you feel more comfortable with than others? It is ok for those you feel more comfortable with to stand closer to you than someone you don't feel that way about, right?

And yet when our dogs try to move away from strangers do we shorten the leash to make them stay? Do we baby talk them and try to bribe them with goodies to go say hi to the nice person? And do our efforts help? Not usually.

Imagine if you felt uneasy about a person who approached you on the street. You probably would try to make an arc around that person to allow more room while you averted your eyes and tried to hurry past. Now, what if someone held you in place with a leash so that stranger could touch and hug you and stare into your face? Would you like that? Would it make you more likely to like and feel comfortable with that stranger? Probably not.

What if the person tried to bribe you closer with a piece of chocolate? If you really liked chocolate, you might inch closer until you could grab the candy, and then you would try to back away quickly again. Even if you were eating the candy, would you like the stranger any better? Most likely not. But you would be feeling more anxious because you had to go closer to that stranger than you would have liked. But if your uneasiness about the stranger was more than your love of chocolate, you wouldn't even approach.

Many people try to have the stranger feed their dog a treat, thinking the dog will begin to associate the stranger with a yummy treat. While on the surface this might sound like a good idea, it usually is not. While it does work with a few dogs, it can also lead to worsening anxiety or even a bite from your dog. What happens is that your dog will go closer to get the great food (just like you sneaking in to grab the chocolate), but when the food runs out your dog will realize just how close he now is to the scary stranger. This will cause him to be even more worried, as he may not realize how he got so close to the person, and he may not know what to do. This is when he might snap or bite in an attempt to get the person to back away and give him more space, especially if you are holding him close on a short leash and he can't get away.

Don't force your dog to make friends. You may make his anxiety around strangers even worse even though you were trying to make it better. It's ok to say no when people ask if they can pet your dog. It's even ok for your dog to walk away from a stranger or to go sit behind you.

Let your dog walk away. Keep the leash loose and allow him to have a choice about who he greets or doesn't greet. If you give your dog the choice, he will begin to feel more in control of the situation and his stress levels will lessen. You might be surprised ... often if you just hang out near people and ask everyone to ignore your dog, you will soon see him settle down enough to approach and sniff the other people on his own. But it has to be his choice when he feels comfortable enough to do that. If strangers are looking at him or trying to get his attention by reaching out a hand, etc, he will feel pressured and he will begin to worry again.

With time, your dog will become more comfortable around strangers because he will know that they won't be trying to pet him or feed him. If he wants to approach someone to sniff, let him. Ask the other person to ignore him. Praise gently as your dog is sniffing.

Sometimes sitting next to the person on a bench will help your dog feel safe enough to approach. Often a dog will go under the bench and when the people are talking and otherwise engaged, he will sneak closer to sniff the person's shoes.

A dog being approached head-on will most likely try to take a detour away from a new person. This is polite dog language and also a response to the stress of someone approaching him directly. Allow him to move away to create more space so he will be comfortable and keep the leash loose if you can. Following or walking next to a new person can help put your dog at ease much quicker than a person approaching him.



One of my own dogs is worried about strangers. The more I tried to work with him to help him, the more anxious he got. I tried asking people to pet him or to feed him. I tried doing targeting games to have him go say hi to people by touching their hands. Even though with a certain cue (touch) he would do the behavior, his general behavior in public where there were new people got worse because he was never sure which new person I was going to make him interact with.

Taking the pressure off and telling people they couldn't pet my dog, allowed him to feel much more comfortable in the presence of new people and even with them handling him. Of course this took some time. I let it be his choice. If he approaches a person, I praise him. I don't ask him to approach the person. I don't let others push into his space.

When I see that he is curious about the other person and will approach and sniff on his own, I then tell the person how to invite him into their space. If he goes to them, then he has made the choice to interact with them. I give very specific instructions to the person on what to do next. And when my dog moves away, I back away and call him to me, praising him for coming as I explain to the other person that he's had enough now and thank them for taking the time to make friends with him.

Stand up for your dog and protect him and his feelings. He doesn't have a choice when he is on a leash and he can't move away. Remember that it's ok not to allow people to pet your dog. Dogs have varying comfort levels around new people, just like we do. Forcing him to interact will increase his anxiety and make him want to try to avoid new people even more the next time. Instead, take it slow and allow him to tell you how he's feeling about the situation. Give him the freedom to decide who he wants to interact with and over time you may notice that he is making that choice more and more.

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