

Understanding anxiety & its implications for pet greyhounds



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Anxiety is a very common behavioural problem in both racing and retired greyhounds. Indeed it is very common across the canine spectrum, accounting for up to 90% of referrals to veterinary behaviourists.

Anxiety is also a very common reason for relinquishment post adoption, with up to 60% of dogs being returned to shelters for this reason. Greyhounds are no exception.

We know that pet owners are far more likely to relinquish their recently adopted greyhound if it demonstrated:

- Nervous or fearful behaviour
- Inappropriate soiling
- Destructiveness
- Excessive vocalisation and
- If the effort to care for the dog was more than the owner had initially expected

In our experience the last point is a real problem for greyhound adoption. Families are bombarded with images of greyhounds lazing around on couches, sleeping next to bunnies and guinea pigs and cavorting with poultry and children; the epitome of canine perfection. Of course, as with all dogs, the reality can be quite different. Are we in fact setting them up for a fall?

Nonetheless, all of the aforementioned behaviours are frequently misinterpreted by the new owner as signs that they have been lumbered with a badly behaved pet, whereas in fact, they are all signs of anxiety.

So what is anxiety?

Anxiety is driven by fear. Fear itself is a response to a real and immediate stress or situation. In contrast, anxiety is the constant anticipation of something to be feared, which may or may not be real. The animal is in a constant state of emotional turmoil and as with people, this is exhausting and over time will affect their judgement.

Anxiety is usually the underlying reason for aggression, not dominance. Dogs showing signs of aggression are not being “dominant”. In most situations, the dog is anxious or frightened and feels it has no other way to resolve the situation. If it can’t “flight” or get away, it may well be forced to resort to “fight”.

A commonly encountered scenario, particularly early in foster care, relates to the greyhound found sleeping on the family lounge. Look at it from the dog’s perspective: he is ordered off the lounge,

usually from a deep sleep, by someone he may not be overly familiar with. He wakes suddenly to see someone approaching him with arm raised, gesturing and yelling at him to get off the couch.

He also has no-where to go. So what is a dog to do? He growls *because he is scared*. He is not being dominant. However, if his behaviour is misinterpreted as “dominance” and the person ordering him off the couch continues to yell at him, or forcibly removes him from the couch, well, then the dog has just learnt that he was right to be fearful of that person. The next time, he may well bite. (Please refer to the handout: The ladder of aggression; and the website, www.dogwelfarecampaign.org via our links page).

Punishing anxiety will only heighten the fear. Punishment tells the dog what we don’t want it to do, but it doesn’t help them to understand what we want them to do!

In the above scenario, if instead of yelling at the dog, the owner approached the dog calmly, lead in hand ready to attach to the dogs collar in order to guide him off the couch, the dog is instantly more familiar with the expectation. “Oh, he has a lead, we must be going somewhere”. A calm directive, “Off” is given.

Remember, dogs can’t speak English: He simply doesn’t understand to “get off the couch”. After all, what does the word “couch” mean to him?

This logic can be used to explain other commonly encountered scenarios, such as lunging at other dogs on the lead and aggression towards unfamiliar people or objects. An example of this is the greyhound that is growling at children. It is not guarding its bed or trying to dominate the child. It is scared, being in all likelihood totally unfamiliar with small, fast moving and shrieking human beings.

Again, yelling at the dog or banishing it outside will only reinforce in the dogs mind that the children are to be feared. If it is in foster care, it is a clear indicator that this dog should not be placed in a family with young children.

Please note: If you are experiencing this or a similar scenario, for the safety of all concerned, please call us for advice.



Recognising anxiety

- Fight, Flight, Freeze or Fiddle are all variations of the same anxiety related behaviour
- Signs of anxiety in the greyhound can be subtle and easy to miss but include:
 - Licking lips (often anxious dogs have pink staining around their muzzle)
 - Yawning (and you thought you were just boring!)
 - Freezing up or shutting down, non-responsive behaviour
 - Whining
 - Hyper vigilance or scanning the environment
 - Tail tucked low and tight (look closely at the hairs on their tail, they often stick up around the base)
 - Hiding, e.g. behind the couch or under the house
 - Restlessness and difficulty relaxing
 - Following you closely (commonly referred to as the Velcro dog)
 - Destructive behaviour
 - Collecting toys or your objects
 - Lack of appetite
 - Recurring or chronic diarrhoea
- More overt signs of anxiety include growling and biting

Contributory risk factors for anxiety

- Genetics
- Lack of early socialisation during the sensitive period
- The animal may have been exposed to multiple/recurrent traumatic experiences
- Illness or painful conditions

Genetics

By their very nature, hounds are a sensitive group of dogs. Many are often referred to in their breed standard as being “aloof”. The more I get to know them the more I think what they really mean is “anxiety with a freeze response”

Lack of early socialisation

It is generally accepted and well documented now that early socialization and habituation are vitally important for puppies. In order to be a well adjusted canine citizen, dogs need to be exposed to a wide variety of sociable and friendly dogs and people as well as sights, sounds and smells during the critical early socialisation period.

The first few months of a dog’s life are the most important for “normal” social development. In addition, continued exposure to new and novel things is critical during the first 12 months of life. During this period, most greyhound puppies are being raised in a rural environment, devoid of normal every day household



sights and sounds that other dogs take for granted such as washing machines, television, traffic, busy streets etc. By the age of 4 months, many are transported to a rearing facility, with only a couple of handlers and the other young greyhounds for company. Life becomes quite routine.

In summary, their life is devoid of unpredictability. This is fine whilst they are in a kennel situation, and dogs do thrive in a structured environment. However, problems can arise when the dog retires and suddenly loses the safe, predictable environment offered by a kennel. They are abruptly thrust into a world full of sights, sounds and smells that are previously foreign to them. Behaviourally, this can manifest as fear and anxiety.

This is the reason why it is no longer considered best practice to shift foster dogs around multiple different homes unless absolutely necessary. Basically, the dog “is what it is”. A behavioural assessment aims to identify what that “is”, and then re-home the dog accordingly.

Past traumatic experiences

Past trauma can result in profound fears, anxiety and phobias, even just the one incident. This doesn't only apply to pre adoption either. I have met many a greyhound that has developed post traumatic stress disorder after being taken to an off leash park, in the mistaken understanding that this environment will enhance their socialisation.

In this scenario, the dog is not comfortable with the environment. He may be rushed at or chased by other more confident dogs. The subtle signs of anxiety, such as licking lips and low, tucked tail may be overlooked or interpreted as the dog still needing more socialisation.

The greyhound desperately wants to leave the off leash area, (flight) but can't, therefore may resort to fight. How do these dogs present to us? As a greyhound that has just “attacked” another dog in an off leash park or bitten their owner or someone else. This is not to be confused with prey drive, which is discussed in more detail elsewhere.

Illness or painful conditions

If your greyhound is exhibiting signs of anxiety, it is important to have them assessed by a veterinarian to rule out any contributing conditions, such as spinal pain or a range of arthritic conditions. Not uncommonly they can be suffering in silence due to an undershot jaw. The lower canines may be impacting or gouging a hole into the upper hard palate.



So, what can we do to help the fearful or anxious greyhound?

From a practical perspective, re-homers need to have a sound understanding of anxiety and its potential consequences. Behavioural assessments are essential to ensure the re-homer is familiar with the dog's temperament and limitations, and therefore what home would be most suitable.

Re-homing a dog is very much a two way street and in order to be successful, one must consider both the needs of the new owner and the greyhound. Remember, what constitutes a big problem for one family may not necessarily be something you as the re-homer or foster carer may even consider to be an issue!

Dogs with anxiety may be best placed in quiet homes, without children playing rough and tumble games etc. Even subtle anxiety can eventually manifest as a growling, snappy, unrelaxed dog particularly around children or other pets. In the wrong situation these dogs are a potential danger for their new family and at high risk for relinquishment back to you!

New owners, well you have no control over your dog's genetics or past experiences, but you can help control what your dog learns from now on.

Practical advice for dealing with an anxious greyhound

- Most importantly, learn to understand and recognise both the signs and triggers for your dog's anxiety, and remove them from situations that make them fearful. Greyhounds are notorious for giving a 'freeze' response in which they just get a bit of a glazed look and do nothing. Doing nothing does not mean they are ok. In fact, they may be a corked pressure cooker, just waiting to blow. Invariably they do
- Many people aim to overcome their dog's fears by repeatedly forcing them into scary situations. This tends to make things worse rather than better, and can turn an anxious dog into a phobic one. It can also escalate aggression
- Controlled exposure to a variety of pleasant, low threatening sounds, sights and experiences will help these dogs, but learning must take place when the dog is calm. It will not learn if it is scared or anxious. As soon as the signs of anxiety appear, remove the dog from the situation. Do reward calm behaviour
- From a purely welfare perspective, serious cases of anxiety require veterinary intervention. Anxiety itself should be considered a medical problem, not a training problem. A full physical examination will rule out medical causes, prior to the implementation of a structured behavioural management program. Often, short term use of anxiolytic medication is required. In our experience, Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP) is helpful, either on its own or in combination with medication

Please don't underestimate the potential implications of anxiety for your pet or foster greyhound. If you have any concerns or questions regarding your greyhound's behaviour, please contact us for further assistance.

A behavioural consultation will help us to identify the level and type of anxiety, thus allowing us to offer practical advice and support for both you and your dog.

