



The Story in Brief

The founder of **Fear Free**, American vet Marty Becker, has spent his life working towards better health, both mental and physical, for pets. He established the **Fear Free** movement in 2016.

Fear Free works to prevent and alleviate fear, anxiety, and stress (FAS) in pets by inspiring and educating the people who care for them. This includes vets, vet nurses, behaviourists, trainers, physios, groomers and other pet professionals.

FearFreeHappyHomes.com provides inspiration and education for pet owners and animal rescue staff and volunteers through FearFreeShelters.com.

WHAT IS FEAR?

Fear is a normal response to a threat. But it travels many paths to a dog's brain e.g

- a lack of socialising
- a lack of consistency in life (being rehomed etc)
- traumatic experiences
- unpredictable lives
- early life painful illness or injuries

the list goes on.

When a dog becomes fearful/frightened, what we see is a dog perhaps cowering or trying to hide - even trembling. What we are not seeing are the major events which have occurred inside the dogs body - changing the way he feels both emotionally and physically. Making sure that he will never forget that experience!



Fear can be genetic, starting in the womb. A bitch that is traumatised when pregnant for example, the stress hormone floods over the unborn puppies and results in the puppies being born with a pre-disposition to being fearful. Research is also showing us that a lack of maternal care from bitch to pup can hamper the pup from growing into a confident dog!

The numbers that came back from Guide Dogs in 2022 in the UK is suggesting that almost 75% of dogs exhibit poor mental health with almost 20% showing symptoms weekly.



WHAT IS ANXIETY?

While anxiety and fear may feel similar to a dog, anxiety is apprehension or nervousness about an anticipated threat. Think about it - a dog that only ever goes in the car to either go to the vets or perhaps the kennels - neither things the dog is happy about - now starts to become anxious about getting into the car. He is getting anxious about what he 'thinks' is going to happen!

Long-term anxieties to for example loud noises or strangers or vet visits produce maladaptive stress responses. Maladaptive stress responses can cause physical illness and emotional distress for your dog.

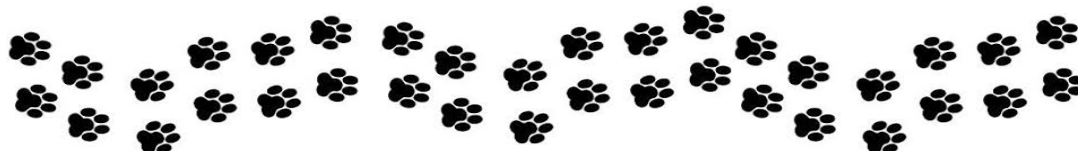
WHAT IS STRESS?

As discussed, Fear and Anxiety are 2 different emotional states. Stress refers to the consequence of any emotional, mental or physical demand on the dog's brain or body. When a dog becomes stressed - whether its good stress (excitement over a visitor to the house) or bad stress (aversive training methods being used) the dog's body reacts in exactly the same way..... the stress hormones including cortisol rise sharply. This sharp rise, particularly in cortisol, can take a few hours or a lot longer to subside to pre arousal levels. When stress hormone levels are raised, the dog will be even more likely to react even faster to events around him.



As we all know now, pets are sentient beings who experience many emotions— FAS, or Fear, Stress, Anxiety, for example—just as humans do. They also have an amygdala in the brain, shown to play a key role in the processing of emotions that stores negative experiences. Unlike humans, pets can't understand why a negative procedure (like being given the Kennel Cough vacc for example) is actually benefiting them or anticipate or expect it be over - even if that is only seconds away.

As a consequence of traumatic vet visits, the pet doesn't even have to be at the facility or be receiving care/services to have the equivalent of a panic attack, or freak out. Just seeing the carrier being taken out of the cupboard - particularly for a cat, or being put in the car, or driving down a particular road, or pulling up to the vets, causes emotional trauma - this is a maladaptive stress response caused by repeated exposure to these circumstances causing long term anxieties.



So if you know or are suspicious that your pet is anxious, fearful or stressed about being in the veterinary setting, please talk to your vet or vet nurse about bringing them into the vets for 'Happy Visits' - where nothing bad or unpleasant happens to them, only good and nice things like tasty treats, cuddles, games with toys, being allowed to wander about the reception area and/or consulting room at their own pace to explore and start to feel less worried about it all!

There are almost 100,000 Certified **Fear Free** Professionals in more than 50 different countries throughout the world. Of that number, just over 1,400 have achieved the highest qualification in **Fear Free** which is 'Elite'. There are only 25 'Elite' **Fear Free** Certified professionals currently in the UK, of which I am very proud to say I am one! (these statistics are correct at time of writing 8/5/23)

