

The Barking Dog

When your dog barks, he is communicating. A barking dog is like a chatty child. It can be frustrating for sure, but you would never think your child is bad for an ongoing stream of words! Barking is not done to annoy you and you will never stop your dog from barking entirely. Hopefully, however, you can reduce this noisome behavior. Figuring out what your dog is “saying” can help you solve the barking problem.

Some common causes of barking are:

- Fear and anxiety barking
- Barking when painful
- Excitement barking
- Attention-seeking barking
- Cognitive dysfunction (like dementia.)
- Excitement/arousal

If your dog is barking in response to stimuli, 99% of the time that means he has some fear of that stimuli. It makes him uncomfortable. Your dog is distressed by something he sees. He has been rewarded over and over for his barking because, for example, if he barks at a passing car, the car does move away from him eventually. If he barks when someone comes to your

door, that person will go away eventually, reinforcing his barking.



Let's consider cars driving past. To help with this you would need to condition your dog to not be so scared when he sees cars in his territory or create some distance between him and the cars. Most dogs respond most to visual cues. Conditioning your dog to not be scared is a long process that requires patience. You would need to find a place in the house where he doesn't bark when a car goes by. Every time a car goes by, he gets a treat. The very moment the car is in sight, he gets a treat. Then you move closer and closer to the area of highest stimulus, getting him used to the idea that the cars mean treats not a threat.

When dogs bark at the doorbell or with guests in the home, try teaching your pet to sit or lay down and to stay in a spot that is far from where the company will enter. This will have to work hand in hand with praising calmness, just like the dog barking at the window. Guests should specifically be instructed not to look at, talk to, or touch your dog. They should fully ignore him. Another example would be a dog who barks at cats. Start far enough away that there is no barking and gradually move closer with lots of praise for heeded calmness / lay down commands. You may need to pair calmness commands with



being on a leash if you are having trouble controlling your dog initially. If even the sight of a cat from a distance is enough, try behind a door, then with the door cracked and the “thing” far away.

Another idea is to block the stimuli. If your dog barks at cars or pedestrians going by, try a half-curtain to block the line of sight to the stimuli. Window privacy film can sometimes help as well. Also, the ThunderCap can reduce a dogs vision a bit, giving him some perceived distance from the stimulus.

Warning barks are similar to stimulation barks. Try to acknowledge and then transition to a verbal acknowledgement only.

If there are specific times that your dog fear-barks, you can try a Thundershirt or using medications that yours vet can prescribe for individual episodes. If your dog is generally fearful, ongoing medication and environmental changes can help. There are supplements, like L-theanine (Anxitane) or L-tryptophan (Vetriscience Pro Line) that can help.

Painful barks need to address the underlying cause of pain.

Excitement barking can be improved with the calming techniques discussed above.

ThunderShirt's gentle pressure calms and relaxes your dog, like swaddling an infant or providing a calming hug.



Barking to get attention is harder. Essentially this is your dog being a pal. Fill his bucket if you can- Exercise and play where your attention is really on your dog. For people who can't do that, other play (like hide-and-seek) or interactive toys like Kongs can be really helpful. Obedience training can also be helpful and is a particularly fruitful way to give your dog some one-on-one attention.

No research has supported the use of punishment as it does not address the underlying cause of barking. Bark collars, for example, are rarely successful in stopping bad behavior related to barking. If he is scared of cars (and I know, a big German Shepherd seems like he isn't scared of anything, but that is not true!!) and you put a bark collar on him and it shocks him every time he sees a car, he will become more scared of cars.

He may not bark for awhile...but rarely will this cure the barking because the underlying problem remains. If your dog can't communicate with barking, he will find another way!



