



Understanding the Four “F” Responses to Fear

Did you know that dogs and cats demonstrate fear in four different ways? But first, there are a few urban myths to bust!

Almost immediately, many of us incorrectly associate “fight” with cats, but the first subtle sign of fear often is freezing (on an exam table, in a carrier, or in an owner’s lap). Take the time to notice this and adapt restraint or the environment early to help de-escalate the patient more quickly.

And, did you know that many teenage dogs are mislabeled as naughty dogs for being mouthy when their behavior is considered fidgeting? This actually is an early sign of fear.

Review the four “F” responses to fear:

Flight	Fight	Freeze	Fidget
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opportunity for dog to avoid the situation• Attempt to escape• Problems occur if flight is not possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decision to eliminate the stimulus• Aggression	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opportunity for dog to disconnect from the stressful surrounding• “Frozen dog” at the vet clinic...• Danger when dog cannot cope anymore	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Typically, an adolescent dog• Mouthy, jumping on people, pulling on leash, etc• Often called “naughty” dogs
<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Body stiffens, facial tension• Eyes wide, avoids eye contact• Turns head away, turns whole body away• Ears pinned back• Tail tucked, body lowered• Moves away, tries to escape• Retreats as far away as possible• Roll over to evade contact	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Body stiffens, facial tension• Eyes stare• May struggle• May growl and bare teeth• Tail suddenly stops moving• Mouth closes, lips tense, begins to growl• Lunges forward• Bite or snap	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Body stiffens, facial tension• Freezes in place, may tremble• Eyes wide• Mouth closed• Bark, whine• Shut down, refuses treats• May appear to be “sleeping”• Helpless	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Restless• Eyes wide• Lip licking• Yawning• Pacing, pawing• Sniffing• Blinking• Shaking off



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