



**Mindy Wesely, DVM**  
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Border Collies trained for sheep herding. She was also awarded the North Carolina Young Veterinarian of the Year in 2015.

Mindy Wesely is the owning veterinarian at Stokesdale Veterinary Hospital in Stokesdale, NC. The hospital is a full service hospital for dogs, cats and also does mobile house calls and works on farm animals. Dr. Wesely has her own hobby farm of cows, sheep, mustang horses, cats and dogs. In her free time she enjoys working on getting her

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## Anxiety in Dogs

You've probably heard the saying, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder". I'd argue "anxiety is (also) in the eye of the beholder". For example: If I scheduled you to speak to 500 people tomorrow you may feel uneasy. Meanwhile, I'd volunteer for it! There are things in life that you would do with ease that I may cringe at. Feelings of anxiety come from our personalities, partly due to genetics, and largely, our experiences in life. Anxieties range from a feeling to a true medical disorder.

If you are a hero that adopts an adolescent or adult pet you may need to work through issues from past experiences that your pet cannot explain to you. Two common conditioning methods to help your companion overcome apprehension with facing certain situations are desensitization and flooding. Desensitization is initially a slower process that doesn't push an animal over their "freaking out" level. Flooding hyper exposes the animal to what they are distressed about, pushing into their desire to fight or run without letting them do so. The theory is that they live through it and learn that it won't kill them. Flooding is used because it feels like the fastest way to overcome said concern. Many of us have already tried flooding as a training method in a less extreme way because it didn't feel toxic to us. However, we're not the one experiencing the anxiety.

I recently fostered a dog that was terrified of walking through doors. Silly, right? Not to her. She would lose her mind and run away when she was asked to go through one. If and when she got through she'd turn and run back through it the other way. Of course she couldn't tell me why she was afraid of them. I had a choice on how to show her it was safe to do what I was asking of her. **It doesn't matter whether you're trying to work with a dog or cat, train your horse, or move livestock. You have to think like they do and find the safest, easiest way to help them overcome whatever anxiety is present.**

An example of flooding would be to leash her and force her to

walk through the door repeatedly. Occasionally people will argue that since sometimes "flooding" can work for some humans with anxieties, it must work for all animals. The fault with the argument is that we have to be careful about the level of reasoning we understand in animals. Could this "work" on an outward level, as in, can I force her to get over it by dragging her through repeatedly? Likely. Would it build her confidence in an ability to do other things I ask of her? Unlikely. I would argue she may do what I asked in other situations, but her compliance would be based on fear rather than trust. Would it take longer to do it "right". Initially, yes. However, I'd argue that the training that follows would take less time if you build the relationship on trust and understanding.

When I go watch field trials and dog competitions, I'd argue that the BEST trainers are the ones handling dogs that are having the most fun. I'm very likely biased, but I also find those trainers to be the ones with some of the most consistent awards. The same goes for when we ask tasks of our dogs. Why are they listening? Because of force, fear or a happiness to please us as their guardians?

### How does it go from a feeling to a severe anxiety?

Fight or Flight. Almost as simple as that. We all have an innate fight or flight response. Think about a coworker, boss, or relative that you always have a bad experience with. Think of the times you couldn't fight them despite wanting to (I'd not suggest it!) and you couldn't avoid them. If you were forced to deal with them, you likely developed feelings of anxiousness if you knew of an upcoming interaction with them. The severity of the anxiousness correlates to the level of distaste of the interaction. The same goes for our dogs. We need to allow them to express their flight response, if appropriate. For example, for dogs with horrific storm anxieties, they must have a safe place in their home they can "flight" to. They need their own space that is "bomb proof" for whatever they are dealing with. Medications may or may not be needed depending on the severity of the anxiety and their environment.

### Helping to PREVENT Anxieties in Young Dogs

Besides "normal" anxieties like storms, our canine companions can suffer from other more silent and unnoticed anxieties, like dealing with new people, motorized machines, other animals, cats, etc. Starting at eight weeks is THE most important time to socialize your pups. Of course there are important ways to keep your dog safe from infectious diseases during this time, too. Ashley Ferris, the dog trainer, at Pampered Paws Village in Stokesdale and I will be writing a follow up article on how best to prevent anxieties in puppies and how to develop confidence in older dogs.

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