

Fear of the Car

Recognize that your dog's behavior in the car is most likely an emotional reaction that stems from fear. This fear may be the result of scary experience he/she had in a car in the past or just a lack of experience riding in a car. Some dogs don't like the car because of motion sickness. It's always a good idea to try using motion sickness medication to see if the issue stems from that before applying behavior modification procedures. Some dogs don't like the quick motions passing by their eyes during the drive. To rule this out you can put your dog inside of a covered crate or use a Calming Cap (a doggie blindfold) that will cut out that visual aspect of the ride. If these things do not help you will have to do behavior modification in the form of 'systematic desensitization' and 'counterconditioning' to help your dog over his/her fear of the car.

Systematic Desensitization involves slowly exposing your dog to the fearful stimulus (in this case the car), increasing the intensity over time. We often combine systematic desensitization with counterconditioning in order to help pets overcome fear.

Counterconditioning is a procedure whereby you work to change your pet's emotional response to the scary stimulus, from one of fear to one of acceptance, by pairing the scary thing with special treats.

The first step is to reward her with a high value treat for just walking towards the car. Walk only to the point where she is still okay - give the treat and then move away from the car. Do this over and over, moving slightly closer each time, until she readily walks all the way up to the car.

The next step is to have the door open with a treat sitting where the dog can reach it without going inside the car. Do this over and over until the dog readily approached the car and takes a treat off the seat or running board.

The next step is to have your dog jump into the car for a treat. Feed her a few treats while she sits in there and then have her come out and end the session. Do as many of those sessions as you can until she is fine getting into the car. Then start to increase the duration of time that she stays in the car eating treats. The next step would be to give her a stuffed Kong or something yummy like a bully stick that takes longer to eat while she is in the backseat and you are in the drivers seat (do not turn the engine on at this point).

Once he will sit in the back seat (or in his crate) calmly eating the goodie, you can start the engine (but don't drive anywhere). Do this as many times as you can until he is comfortable eating his treat while in the back seat while you sit in the driveway with the engine running.

Eventually, while she is eating her treat, you will start driving slowly for short distances, and then longer distances. You get the point!

Things that can help the process go better:

1. Use extra special treats like chunks of meat in the beginning
2. When at this step make sure the yummy treat in the Kong is irresistible like liverwurst or canned cat food.
3. Spray Adaptil Calming Pheromones in the car before a ride.
4. Playing calming music while she is inside.
5. A Thundershirt might help your dog feel more comfortable.
6. Make sure you *GO SLOWLY*. The process is going to take a while, weeks to months.