

## ANXIETY AND GREYHOUNDS

Fear and anxiety is a negative emotional system that includes behaviours related to protection from threat and danger. While these behaviours are normal in a pet greyhound, the persistence of these emotional states (particularly in the absence of real threat) can result in the development of chronic behavioural issues and can impair a dog's overall health (Dreschel, 2010; Kim et al., 2010). These issues often result in breakdown of the dog-human relationship which may lead to return of greyhounds that don't settle well into their new home (e.g. as seen in Elliott et al., 2010).

In particular, greyhound return is more likely if the dog has displayed unwanted behaviours: isolation distress, noisiness, aggression and difficulty getting along with children and existing pets. The desire to see immediate benefits when adopting and potentially the inability to accept the occurrence of behavioural issues (Mondelli et al., 2010; Powell et al., 2018), makes the return of ex-racing greyhounds highly likely in homes that aren't well prepared to work on gradually adjusting their new friend to his/her home.

Greyhounds are often noted as couch potatoes who can be perfectly suited to the busy urban lifestyle of apartments. While some greyhounds may thrive in such environments, these greyhounds often took quite some time to settle into their new lifestyle and the occurrence of undesirable behaviour (such as isolation distress) likely would have occurred along the way. As previously mentioned, the fear/anxiety emotional system exists to protect an animal (humans included!) from danger. How might a sudden change of environment from racing kennel to pet life be viewed by an animal with no suitable reference points for the new sights/sounds in their adoptive home? With fear and anxiety! At GAP we advocate minimising the fear/anxiety a newly adopted greyhound will likely experience by keeping their world small and exposing them to new things in a gradual and controlled fashion.

Greyhound racing NSW is working with the Greyhound Welfare and Integrity Commission (GWIC) and industry participants to introduce early socialisation programs to improve the emotional health and wellbeing of greyhounds. Despite this, many dogs may come into the program with minimal exposure to a domestic life. So, some fear/anxiety (from both human and greyhound!) is to be expected when first settling into a home. To set you up for success, the Greyhounds As Pets (GAP) team will endeavour to best match you with a greyhound that will be most likely to cope with your lifestyle and expectations. We will also provide you with as much information as possible to ensure your expectations are realistic.

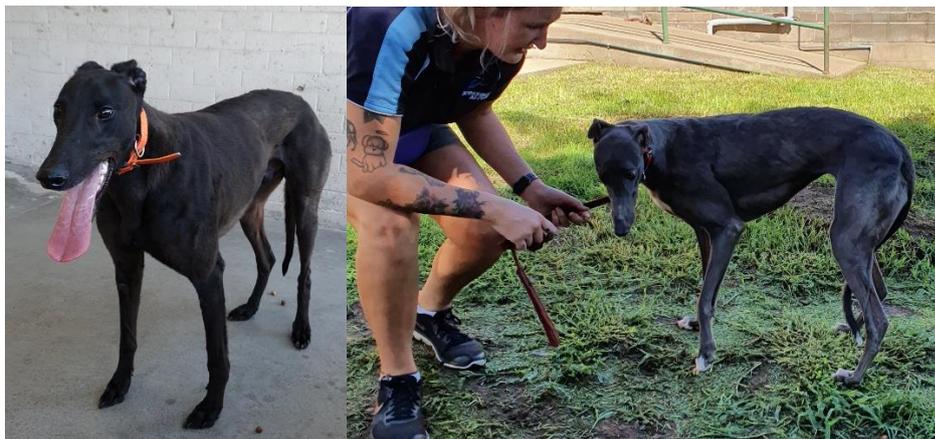
### **Behavioural signs of fear and anxiety**

- Behaviours related to fear/anxiety (or other negative emotional systems) can fall under the following categories:

- **Avoidance**- removing his/herself from the trigger. This can involve, hiding, cowering, shifting away and escaping.



- **Inhibition**- this often involves when escape is impossible and the dog can only gather information. It is characterised by a stiffening of the body, a glazed stare and apparent inaction. Freezing on lead is the most common example of inhibition in greyhounds.



- **Appeasement**- this encompasses social behaviours designed to gather information from other social objects and minimise conflict. Such behaviours can include leaning, licking the face and a lowered body posture. In isolation, appeasement behaviour is quite normal for standard social interactions between dogs (or dogs and humans) but is indicative of a negative emotional state should these signs persist throughout an interaction and prevent normal functioning.



- **Repulsion (or aggression)**- behaviours designed to make a trigger go away. These can include stiffening, growling, snarling, snapping and biting.



- Greyhounds are also known as passive stress copers. This means early indications of stress and discomfort may be missed by us humans. These will occur more often than to be expected in normal interactions. Such signs can include:
  - Licking lips (often anxious dogs have pink staining around their muzzle)
  - Yawning
  - Freezing up or shutting down, non-responsive behaviour, refusing to walk on the leash
  - Whining
  - Hyper vigilance or scanning the environment
  - Tail tucked low and tight
  - Hiding
  - Restlessness and difficulty relaxing
  - Seeking constant proximity to adopter (commonly referred to as the Velcro dog)
  - Destructive behaviour
  - Collecting toys or household objects
  - Lack of appetite
  - Recurring or chronic diarrhoea
  - Growling, snarling, snapping and (in extreme circumstances) biting

## Working with fearful or anxious greyhounds

As discussed, almost all greyhounds will experience some fear/anxiety when settling into their adoptive homes. To reduce this, adopters should learn to recognise the behavioural signs of fear and anxiety. This information can then be used to slowly and gradually expose the dogs to potential triggers. For example, a greyhound that freezes during its first week in care would benefit from a period of no walks, then progressed to short walks in quiet areas with opportunities for sniffing and exploration.



There can be a desire to want to throw some dogs in the 'deep end' by exposing them to things they fear to encourage them to 'get over it', particularly if we, as humans, know the thing causing the fear ('the trigger') is not threatening. This is known as 'flooding' and often results in the worsening of the behaviour by inducing inhibition (learned helplessness) and/or aggression (repulsion behaviour). Both of these outcomes are bad for the dog-human bond and will only slow the dog's progress in their new home.

For dogs that display significant anxiety with limited recovery over time and/or a more generalised anxiety with no discernible trigger, further intervention is required. These dogs benefit most in quiet homes that can afford them the space they need to investigate the domestic world at their own pace. Homes with young children are not suitable because of the chaos and noise that often go with them! Interventions such as Adaptil collars or diffusers can help lower the dog's anxiety and settle them into their routine quicker. Other products such as the compound Zylkene can reduce the behavioural signs of anxiety. You can talk to your vet about these treatments.



Dogs that experience significant (i.e. not proportionate to their environment) fear/anxiety in their adoptive home should be referred to a veterinary behaviourist for examination and possible treatment. Some of these dogs may require behavioural medication and lifelong management to set them up for success in their home. These medications may vary in their dose and usage, but all function to improve a dog's mental wellbeing and quality of life in their home. While sometimes stigmatised, behavioural medication is not a last resort, but an affordable treatment for the concerning medical conditions affecting mental health, such as anxiety.

The GAP team can provide you with resources on training techniques, environmental optimisation and/or behavioural modification to help a dog with fear/anxiety further settle into their home. If you believe your greyhound could benefit from further support, please consider consulting with a veterinary behaviourist and/or ask GAPNSW for further information.

## References

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