

From Super Speedy to Stationary - Why do Some Greyhounds Freeze on Walks?

By Susan McKeon, Happy Hounds Dog Training and Behaviour

You're enjoying a leisurely walk with your greyhound and suddenly, he/she puts on the brakes and won't move. It can appear like your greyhound's paws are superglued to the pavement or that your dog is being 'stubborn' as, no matter what you do, you just can't get them to move.

It can be easy for us to misunderstand why our dogs behave in a certain way and, in reality, the reason for freezing is not that your pet is being stubborn or dominant (both misused and misunderstood terms when it comes to dog behaviour). It is more likely that your greyhound is scared or worried by something in their immediate environment, and it is the underlying emotion of fear that has caused them to 'apply the brakes'.

You may wonder what your dog has to be afraid of- after all, they're in a comfortable family home, are well-fed and receive plenty of walks, love, and attention. However, before they became a family pet, for a large number of retired racing greyhounds, their lives revolved around life in racing kennels and the routine that goes with it. Exposure to everyday sights and sounds is not something that the average greyhound experiences.

The flight or fight response

Most of us have heard of the 'flight or fight' response - when faced with a threatening situation we can choose to run away (flight) or resist forcibly (fight). Our greyhounds have the same response mechanism, but with the addition of the freeze behaviour - being rooted to the spot, in response to a perceived threat.

As our greyhounds are on-lead when this occurs, their option to move away (flight) is removed which is why they freeze. They may just freeze for a matter of seconds (which you may not notice), or they may suddenly stop and refuse to move forward.

Overcoming fears and getting moving again

To help our greyhounds adjust to these new experiences and overcome their fears, they need our time, patience, understanding, and training using reward-based training methods. The key thing to remember is not to force your dog to move towards the thing they are scared of as this is counterproductive, making it likely for them to be more afraid of walks.

One of the main ways of helping our pets overcome fears is using a behaviour modification training technique called 'systematic desensitisation and counter-conditioning.' What this means is teaching your dog that the 'scary stuff' isn't scary at all and that it is actually a very good thing, which predicts good stuff happening. This is counter-conditioning and systematic desensitisation is a very gradual process with repeated pairings of the 'scary stuff' with really good stuff.

If your dog continues to freeze on walks it is recommended that you seek help from your local RGT branch, RGT head office, or a professional, qualified dog trainer and/or behaviourist to help with the training, such as members of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, UK (www.apdt.co.uk) and the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (www.apbc.org.uk).