

## Once Bitten, Twice Shy: Personal Safety Around Residents' Animals

### QUESTION

*I started out as a service tech and once, years ago, I was bit by a resident's dog while in their unit repairing a leaky faucet. I've sought out no-pets properties since but last week a lady moved into my current complex with an assistance animal. She's nice and the dog seems pleasant enough, but I'm nervous about the situation.*

*Any advise?*

*-Trembling in Tampa*

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### RESPONSE

Dear TT

Of course, whether you accept pets or are limited to disability-related aid animals, there's no apartment staff encounter residents' and prospects critters on-the-job. Most are likely friendly but even the sweetest, most docile critter can act quite differently if injured, ill, or it feels threatened.

When I teach humans about critter communications I compare it to an English as a Second Language experience – we simply don't have a shared language – and we aren't always adept at reading their cues. But the truth is, critters communicate with us all the time. What's more, we're communicating volumes to them – once and a while intentionally, usually unintentionally, and very often by the mere virtue of physical traits and nonverbal mannerisms we're not aware of.

All of this makes us come across, often, as unintentionally and inconsistently threatening to other species including, potentially, the pup that just moved into your property. Luckily, we do all use body language and, in fact, employ it even more heavily than verbal cues.

Start by becoming mindful of animals' stance. Picture that pooch you met recently standing with all four feet on the ground in a neutral body position – that is, not leaning forward or leaning back.

Now picture it leaning back, away from whatever or whoever is in front of it. This stance should be an indication to you that the animal's afraid or shy. If *you* are thing in front of the animal making it uncomfortable and you approach, the critter has three options:

1. run if there's an escape route available to it,
2. submit to you,
3. or attack.

If the animal feels cornered and can't run or doesn't feel like submitting, you may find that in a split second it changes from leaning back in fear to lunging forward to attack.

In a forward-leaning posture the dog may be assertive or maybe aggressive; at the very least, it's *interested* in what or who is in front of it. Just because an animal is interested and leaning forward does not mean it's about to attack. It may have instantly decided you're its new best friend and it can't wait to lick your face. In either case, the stance is an example of body language that you should be paying attention to.

Something else to look for is what's called 'whale eyes,' which is often misread or overlooked completely. It happens when critters look at you from the corner of their eyes with its head turned away. The result shows the whites of the eyes in a crescent moon shape. The expression can

look simply adorable but in reality what that look is saying is, "I'm really nervous here. I don't want to be aggressive but I'll defend myself if I have to. Please give me some space."

Many swoop in to comfort, cuddle, and console, which only serves to:

1. confirm the aggressive or domineering behavior the dog was afraid of;
2. reduce the critter's personal space; and
3. remove any available escape routes.

At that point, feeling cornered, the dog may attack, earning a scolding or worse. Yet, it's us who too often fail to read the critters' cues and remain oblivious to how our own physical traits, body language, and behavior influence our encounters with other species.

Your safety should absolutely be #1 and awareness of critter communications can help you maintain that safety and your professionalism around residents' pets and / or assistance animals.

I hope these tips help!

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*Jo has also studied emergency preparedness and disaster response with a focus on animals since 2005. She is an Oregon-based speaker and writer who takes an entertaining, personable approach to educating audiences and readers.*

*Regardless of topic or industry, Jo's aim is to inform, empower, and inspire with historical and relatable context, understandable concepts, and bottom line considerations. Visit Jo's web site <http://www.JoBecker.weebly.com/>*