

Words: Christopher Paul Jones, author of 'Face your Fears'



# Release THE fear

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Know someone who is scared of dogs? What are the causes, impact and solutions? Find out more...

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**W**e are, of course, a nation of dog lovers but not everyone dissolves with joy at the sight of one of our canine friends. Indeed, some people finds that sight of a wagging tail sends shivers down their spine, or they freeze in fear when a playful dog barks.

Millions worldwide experience cynophobia, the fear of dogs. Often dismissed as an eccentricity, cynophobia can be a debilitating condition that significantly impacts daily life.

### Causes

There are four likely causes of cynophobia.

#### *Vicarious Learning:*

Witnessing others' fear of dogs can lead you to develop a phobia too, underscoring social learning's role.

*Evolutionary Perspective:* Ancestral fears of predators like wolves might have evolutionary roots. Although domesticated dogs pose much lesser threats, this primal fear can persist.

*Cultural Attitudes:* Cultural norms shape perceptions of dogs. Societies viewing animals as utilitarian may foster greater fear, whereas cultures with close human-animal bonds may encourage ease and comfort.

*Traumatic Experiences:* Past negative experiences with dogs often form the core of this phobia. Traumatic encounters in childhood, such as being bitten, chased, or threatened by a dog, can deeply embed a fear response that persists into adulthood. This enduring anxiety is rooted in Pavlovian conditioning, a process where the brain forms a strong association between the stimulus (dogs) and the traumatic response (fear), even in situations where dogs pose no real threat. Understanding this connection emphasizes that cynophobia is not an irrational fear but a learned response to genuine past dangers.

### Severity and Impact

The intensity of fear can range from mild discomfort around dogs to debilitating panic attacks triggered by any canine encounter. Some individuals might only experience fear in specific situations, like encountering unleashed dogs or being in crowded dog parks. Others

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might experience anxiety around any dog, regardless of size, breed, or behaviour. Fear can strain friendships, prevent visits to dog-owning relatives, and hinder social activities like walks in the park. Anxiety about encountering dogs in public places can limit travel options and restrict daily routines. The fear can be ever-present, casting a shadow over daily activities and creating a sense of unease. The phobia might be trivialized or dismissed by others, and a dog lover might even take the phobic person's avoidance of their dog personally, making the person feel judged and adding to the emotional burden.



### How Can We Change This Fear?

Most phobias can be addressed, and in the majority of cases they can be removed completely. There are seven stages to this process, which I call the Integrated Change System. The seven steps are known as the seven Rs.

#### RECOGNISE WHAT YOU'RE REALLY AFRAID OF

Understanding the roots of any phobia is crucial. Identifying not just the surface-level fear (dogs, in this case) but also the deeper fears it represents (e.g., fear of harm, loss of control, or a past traumatic event) is key. Instead of asking, "Why am I afraid of dogs?" focus on questions that go deeper, like "What specifically about dogs scares me?" "When did I first feel this fear?" and "What do I need to believe to feel this way?"

#### RELAX THE CONSCIOUS MIND

Calmness is the key to accessing emotions and letting them go. Achieving a state of relaxation allows us to work with these fears more effectively.

The process is the "4-7-8 Breathing Technique," which involves inhaling quietly through the nose for four seconds, holding the breath for seven seconds, and exhaling forcefully through the mouth, pursed around the tongue, for eight seconds. This breathing pattern, repeated three to four times, acts as a natural tranquiliser for the nervous system. It's particularly effective in reducing anxiety because it increases the amount of oxygen in the bloodstream, slows the heart rate, and stabilizes blood pressure—counteracting the physiological symptoms of anxiety.

#### REWARD FOR YOUR FEAR (SECONDARY GAIN)

Phobias can serve hidden purposes even if it doesn't seem logical. Emotions aren't logical. Things like avoiding situations we find uncomfortable, receiving attention and care from others, or feeling that fear protects us or keeps us safe are all hidden gains. Identifying the secondary gains can help us change any blocks that stop us from letting go of our fear. One way to find the secondary gain is to ask, "Does this fear keep me safe from situations I perceive as dangerous?", "Do I receive comfort or attention because of this fear?" "What might I lose if this fear were to disappear now?" Trust your first answers that comes; you might find some things you had never thought about before.

### RECIPE (DECONSTRUCTING YOUR STRATEGY)

Everything we do, including phobias, operates according to a subconscious 'recipe'—a sequence of thoughts, behaviours, and feelings that reinforce, in this case, the fear. By getting clear on our recipe for fear, it becomes easier to change it. A highly effective technique involves changing the internal representation of the fear.

*Visual Changes:* Imagine the dog that triggers your phobia. Now, in your mind's eye, start to shrink that image, make it lose its colour until it's black and white, and then let it play backward like a film reel running in reverse. This process helps in diminishing the emotional impact the image has on you. The absurdity of a dog walking backward in a silent movie fashion creates a distance between you and the fear.

*Auditory Changes:* Pair this altered visual with a change in any sounds associated with your fear. If the bark of a dog is a trigger, imagine that sound becoming high-pitched, like a cartoon character, or even overlay it with a ridiculous sound effect. Incorporating humorous or nonsensical auditory elements further breaks down the fear's intensity. This is similar to the Ridiculous Spell in Harry Potter; by actively changing how we visualize

and hear our fears, we engage different neural pathways, reducing the original stimulus's emotional and physiological impact. Moreover, laughter and humour have been shown to reduce stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline.

### RELEASE THE PAST

This step addresses the root of the fear, often buried in past experiences, by finding the first event and changing the mind's link to fear. This can then have an effect on how somebody will feel about that fear in the future.

One way to release the past is through tapping. Begin by clearly identifying the fear or specific event related to your dog phobia. This might be a past incident where you felt threatened or scared by a dog. Hold this memory in your mind.

*The Setup:* Start by tapping on the karate chop point (the outer edge of your hand) with the fingertips of the other hand. As you tap, verbalize your fear and your acceptance of yourself despite this fear. For example, "Even though I have this fear of dogs, I deeply and completely accept myself."

*Tapping Sequence:* Proceed to tap lightly but firmly on the sequence of points: the eyebrow, side of the eye, under the eye, under the nose, the chin, the collarbone, under



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the arm, and top of the head. While tapping each point about seven times, briefly state your fear to maintain focus on the issue.

*Reframing:* After a few rounds of tapping, begin to introduce a positive reframing of your fear. For instance, "I choose to release this fear" or "I am open to feeling safe around dogs." Tapping on specific meridian points while focusing on a fear or negative emotion sends signals to the amygdala (the brain's fear centre) to calm down, reducing the emotional intensity of the memory.

### RECONDITION YOUR EMOTIONS

The essence of emotional reconditioning lies in recognising that our responses to dogs—or any fear-inducing stimuli—are learned behaviours. Much like Pavlov's dogs learned to associate a bell with food, we've learned to link dogs with fear. The good news? Just as a response can be learned, it can also be unlearned or modified.

One way to do this is an exercise known as Emotional Anchoring. This

technique is all about replacing the fear response with something more positive, switching our automatic fear of dogs to a calmer or even positive reaction. Here's how: *Choose a Positive Emotion:* First up, decide on the positive feeling you'd want instead of fear. This could be calm, happiness, or courage. Think of this emotion as your new reaction when you think about or see dogs.

*Find a Memory:* Select a memory where you felt this positive emotion strongly. It could be any happy or calm moment from your life. The key here is that the feeling should be powerful and clear.

*Create Your Anchor:* While immersed in this memory, do a simple physical gesture, like pressing your thumb and forefinger together. This gesture is your anchor. It's a physical action tied to your positive emotion. Now find a new memory and do the same again keep doing this till the act of squeezing your fingers takes you straight to a positive feeling.

Now start thinking about dogs or looking at pictures of dogs and using your anchor. Notice how you feel. What we're doing here is creating a new pathway in the brain. Every time you use your anchor and feel that positive emotion, you weaken the old fear response and strengthen the new, positive one. It's a bit like carving a new path in a forest. The more you walk it, the more defined it becomes.



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### REALISE A POWERFUL FUTURE

Step Seven is about crafting a future where fear doesn't dictate our choices, transforming "what-ifs" and "yes, buts" (which are often the mantra of the anxiety mind) into new positive possibilities.

This is called the "Yep But" and "What If" Exercise.

Start by jotting down the most frequent "Yep but" and "What if" thoughts that bubble up when you think about interacting with dogs. These might be thoughts like, "Yep, but last time didn't go well," or "What if the dog jumps on me?"

Now challenge them: For each "Yep but" and "What if," ask yourself, "Is this thought helping me or hindering me?" Challenge the validity of these thoughts. How many of these imagined scenarios have actually happened? How many are based on assumptions rather than facts?

*Script Flipping:* Now, for the fun part—flipping the script. Rewrite each "Yep but" and "What if" into a positive statement or question.

For example, "Yep, but last time didn't go well," becomes "What if this time, I feel more prepared and confident?" Transform "What if the dog jumps on me?" into "What if the dog calmly sits by my side?"

*Visualization and Affirmation:* Take your statements and visualize them. Close your eyes and picture the positive outcomes. Pair this with affirmations that reinforce your new narrative, like "I am capable of feeling calm and in control around dogs."

After following these steps and repeating them as needed, you may find that your fear of dogs becomes reduced. You can find more detailed processes for dealing with dog and other phobias in my new book, "Face Your Fears."



### About the author

Christopher Paul Jones is a leading Harley Street phobia expert. Having overcome his own phobias, Christopher's culmination of over 20 years of research across Europe, North America and Asia is an integrated approach combining mainstream psychology with cutting edge techniques: The Integrated Change System™. The system aims to change the mind's danger response and leave people free and happy to enjoy things they once found terrifying. A fear, anxiety or phobia can be cured in as little as a session. Christopher's clients come from all over the world and include Hollywood actors and Oscar nominees, models, musicians, presenters and celebrities.

- [www.christopherpauljones.com](http://www.christopherpauljones.com)
- New book "Face Your Fears": <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Face-Your-Fears-Conquering-Phobias/dp/1789295327>
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