Social Anxiety in Dogs

When dogs are puppies they have the comfort of their mother and litter mates. A lactating bitch will often produce a pheromone which helps with appeasement in her puppies. Then all of a sudden, they are collected by their new owners and no longer have this comfort. They are brought into a foreign environment with people they don't know/recognise. As you can imagine, this is quite a daunting and worrying time for your puppy.

Puppies will often become comfortable with their new owners quite quickly, but it is important that they are adequately socialised from a young age. This is especially important in the first 12 weeks of their life. Therefore the pup should have positive exposure to as much of the world around them as possible. This should be done in a graduated way so as not to overwhelm the puppy. If puppies are not introduced to these situations, such as meeting new people, dogs and surroundings, you may find you have a dog with social anxiety. Although it is important to introduce our puppies to these potentially scary situations, it is also important to understand that socialising doesn't mean doing everything at once. As long as we work to avoid the development of social anxiety as soon as possible we will hopefully prevent negative emotional responses.

What does Social Anxiety look like?
Social anxiety presents itself in different ways, some examples include cowering, shivering, yawning excessively, panting, hiding behind owner, running away and in extreme cases growling or biting. Some other signs of over arousal are barking, leash grabbing/ragging, being 'over excited', jumping up and pulling on the lead. It's important to understand that these are emotional responses to a situation which your puppy is finding difficult.

How can we help/avoid social anxiety?
Firstly, if they are puppies, socialisation is key. Regular exposure to people, other dogs and unusual surroundings to help them become desensitised. It is vital this is done in a calm and positive manner, so using high value treats and lots of praise. This will help them learn to adapt to such situations throughout their life.

Introductions to new people should be done step by step, being careful not to overwhelm the dog and potentially creating another problem. Do this by introducing one person at a time, having them offer nice treats by gently throwing them in their direction, but not directly at them. This mean that they identify the treat coming from this new person, but they do not have to approach the new person if they do not want to. We mustn't force contact, it must be from the dogs/puppies decision. Hopefully over time, your dog will realise "this is a nice person who feeds me treats so I want to come and say hello". When they do come to say hello, make sure the new person only offer a hand and the palm (to go under chin) rather than over the dogs head. This can be frightening because they can't always see this and may get spooked.

Introductions to dogs should also be done slowly. Try and choose a calm dog to meet with whilst we work on their confidence and make sure there is distance between the two. The meeting doesn't need to be a long meeting. Try and be calm yourself as this will help with your puppy's confidence, give them lots of praise when they initiate communication with the other dog, even if it's a couple steps in their direction. If you notice a lot of anxiety then increase the distance between the two dogs. Ideally choose a quiet location where there aren't other distractions or social anxiety triggers.

How long will it take to correct social anxiety?
Unfortunately this is like asking "how long is a piece of string"? There is no right or wrong answer. Especially for puppies is could be quicker as they are generally more confident than older dogs and haven't had years of instilled social anxiety. This is why it is important to socialise them from a young age and exposing them to potentially fearful situations. It is a hard task to do, but with consistency, a positive outcome can be achieved.