

Fear of Thunder and Lightning

This 3-part tip sheet includes a good article from the Humane Society of the United States website. Reprinted with permission from Partnership for Animal Welfare, Inc., P.O. Box 1074, Greenbelt, MD 20768

Part 1

While a good "kraack" or "boom" may have been good while Batman was taking down the Joker, such startling sounds are no joke for your dog. Firecrackers, thunder and other loud, out-of-nowhere sounds often leave dogs frightened and wanting to flee to a safer place. These types of fears may develop even though your dog has had no traumatic experiences associated with the sound. The good news is that many fear-related problems can be successfully resolved. If left untreated, however, your dog's fearful behavior will probably get worse.

The most common behavior problems associated with fear of loud noises are destruction and escaping. When your dog becomes frightened, she tries to reduce her fear. She may try to escape to a place where the sounds of thunder or firecrackers are less intense. If she feels less afraid by leaving the yard or going into a certain room or area of the house, then the escape or destructive behavior is reinforced because it successfully lessens her fear. For some dogs, just the activity or physical exertion associated with one of these behaviors may be an outlet for their anxiety. Unfortunately, escape and/or destructive behavior can be a problem for you and could also result in physical injury to your dog.

Your dog may also begin to associate a particular startling noise with other things in her environment, and she may grow afraid of these other things because she associates them with the loud noise that frightens her. For example, dogs who are afraid of thunder may later become afraid of the wind, dark clouds, and flashes of light that often precede the sound of thunder. Dogs who do not like the sound of firecrackers may become fearful of the children who have the firecrackers or may become afraid to go in the backyard, if that's where they usually hear the noise.

What You Can Do to Help

Create a Safe Place: Try to create a safe place for your dog to go to when she hears the noises that frighten her. But remember, this must be a safe location from her perspective, not yours. Notice where she goes, or tries to go, when she's frightened, and if at all possible, give her access to that place. If she's trying to get under your bed, give her access to your bedroom.

You can also create a "hidey hole" that is dark, small, and shielded from the frightening sound as much as possible. Encourage her to go there when you're home and the thunder or other noise occurs. Consider using a fan or radio near the spot to help block out the sound. Feed her in that location and help your dog associate that spot with other "good things" happening to her there. She must be able to come and go from this location freely. Confining her in the "hidey hole" when she doesn't want to be there will only cause more problems. The "safe place" approach may work with some dogs, but not all. Some dogs are motivated to move and be active when frightened and "hiding out" won't help them feel less fearful.

Distract Your Dog: This method works best when your dog is just beginning to get anxious. Encourage her to engage in any activity that captures her attention and distracts her from behaving fearfully. Start when she first alerts you to the noise and is not yet showing a lot of fearful behavior, but is only watchful. Immediately try to interest her in doing something that she really enjoys. Get out the tennis ball and play fetch (in an escape-proof area), or practice some commands that she knows. Reward her with praise and treats for paying attention to the game or the commands.

As the storm or other noise builds, you may not be able to keep her attention on the activity, but it might delay the start of the fearful behavior for longer and longer each time you do it. If you can't keep her attention and she begins acting fearfully, stop the process. If you continue, you may inadvertently reinforce her fearful behavior.

Behavior Modification: Behavior modification techniques are often successful in reducing fears and phobias. The appropriate techniques are called "counter-conditioning" and "desensitization." These techniques condition or teach your dog to respond in non-fearful ways to sounds and other stimuli that have previously frightened her.

Part 2: Fear of Thunder

Many dogs are disturbed by thunderstorms; some have full-blown thunderstorm phobia. "Affected dogs relentlessly seek the attention of their owner or some safe place and puff and pant as they pace to and fro, sometimes losing control of their bladder or bowels in

their anxiety.... In extreme cases, dogs have been known to tear through screens and hurl themselves out of windows," writes Dr. Nicholas Dodman in "The Dog Who Loved Too Much." Dogs who display no fear of storms as puppies may develop this fear later in life, and often, thunder-phobics exhibit other anxieties as well.

Dr. Dodman writes that phobia treatment usually involves careful reintroduction to the fear-inducing stimulus, also known as desensitization. (For example, use tape recordings of storm sounds.) However, many times dogs have a relapse.

The respected Tufts University vet proposes another theory: that frightened dogs are being affected by a build-up of static charge, explaining why some dogs retreat to bathrooms -- to discharge the build-up. They are seeking out conductive surfaces such as sinks, pressing on the pipes in the bathroom. A sink is typically supplied by metal pipes and therefore acts as an electrical grounding device. Says Dr. Dodman: If the cause of thunderstorm phobia is that dogs are receiving small static shocks during storms, it would explain why programs focused on desensitizing dogs to the sound of thunder meet with little success. He suggests that measures to prevent static electrical charge build-up may have preventive value and might benefit as part of a desensitization program. Anti-anxiety medication such as buspirone can help.

An effective technique that PAW's Nancy Klein uses for her doggie Auggie, suggested by a certified specialist in the Bach Flower Essences: add Rescue Remedy to the dogs' water on days when the weather report calls for thunderstorms, and to use Rock Rose specifically (for terror) when the storms are occurring. The drops can be placed on the tongue, or mixed with purified water and misted in the dog's face.

Part 3: The following tips were condensed from an article by Golden Retriever owner Gwen Thee:

Crate Training

Crate-trained dogs may cope better during the storm if confined to their own safe place. An airline crate, or a wire crate that is covered, may work better than an open wire crate.

Calm Reassurance

Some dogs need to be reassured that there is nothing to fear. If the storm makes you nervous, your dog may be picking that up. However, be careful not to inadvertently reward the dog for a fear reaction. If you positively reinforce fear reactions with soothing sounds or stroking when the dog exhibits fear, the reactions will continue.

By ignoring the storm and carrying on with a normal routine, you convey that the storm is no big deal. Another way to reassure the dog without reinforcing the fear reaction is to massage or brush your dog in long even strokes.

Positive Reinforcement

If your dog has a favorite indoor game, or a special treat, try to absorb him in that during the storm. Practice this during storms, and hopefully the dog will eventually associate the storm with good things.

Noise Desensitization

Exposing your dog to different loud noises, and always making sure something good happens, can help to reduce the dog's sensitivity to loud noises. You can play tapes of storms, starting at a low volume and working up to very high volume, and stroke, play with, and teach the dog to ignore the sound. (K-9 Consultants produced a tape with sound effects and instructions available at some pet supply outlets or by calling 800-952-6517.)

Severe Reactions

These may require behavior modification (see a canine behavior specialist) and/or drug therapy involving such drugs as Tranxene and buspirone, or beta-blockers such as Propranolol and Inderol (administered only by a veterinarian).

Homeopathic Remedies

Phosphorus HPUS 30C: Drop 3-5 pellets down back of dog's throat (without touching them yourself) every 15 minutes until you see improvement in the dog's behavior, then stop. Dosage may be repeated if necessary.

Aconitum Napellus 30C: Given in the same way Phosphorus is used.

For milder thunderstorm fears, the Bach Flower (Rescue Remedy or Nature's Rescue) is recommended. Place 4 drops on the dog's tongue or side of the mouth, or in the dog's water bowl. Dose may be repeated 4-5 times an hour. ----

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