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Fears and Phobias in Dogs – Storms and Fireworks – Immediate Guidelines

The ideal way to treat fireworks and thunderstorm phobias is to train your dog using behavior modification techniques such as systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning. This should be started at a time of year when fireworks or thunderstorms are not likely to occur, so that you have control over the situation and time to work on your retraining program. However, if this has not been possible, you need to know how to help your pet during a thunderstorm or fireworks celebration. This handout aims to provide you with some helpful information for immediate treatment of fireworks and thunderstorm phobias. For information on long-term treatment for these phobias, see our other handouts on fears and phobias, counter-conditioning and systematic desensitization, and treatment of fireworks and thunderstorm phobias.

Will drugs help relieve my dog's fear?

Although drugs may be useful in some cases, they should only be given under veterinary supervision. To be effective, they must be absorbed and active in the body BEFORE any noise starts or panic sets in. This is usually at least an hour prior to the event. Sedatives may help the pet sleep through the event or be less aware of the stimuli but do not reduce anxiety. Anti-anxiety drugs may reduce anxiety and panic but may not calm the dog sufficiently.

Certain antidepressants may be useful when given on an ongoing basis to try to prevent or reduce the effect of the stimulus when and if it occurs. With antidepressant treatment, short acting drugs may be added on the day of the fireworks (or storm) if needed. Other possibilities for treatment in conjunction with other drugs include the dog appeasing pheromone (DAP®) and natural products such as melatonin.



What about scolding or punishing my dog?

"Do not punish your dog when he is scared, it only confirms to him that there is something to fear and will make him worse."

Do not punish your dog when he is scared, it only confirms to him that there is something to fear and will make him worse. In addition, if you are upset or anxious about your pet's behavior, this will also make your dog more anxious.

Should I try to reassure my dog?

Do not fuss, pet or try to reassure your dog when he is scared, since he may regard this as a reward for the behavior he is engaging in at that time. By rewarding the behavior, it may become increasingly intense with each future exposure! Although it may be difficult, try to ignore any fearful behavior that occurs.

What should I do that would be helpful?

Practice training your dog to settle and focus on command, using rewards such as favorite treats and toys. Try to associate this training with a favored location in the house (one where the noise of the fireworks and storm might be less obvious – see below), and use some training cues (e.g. a CD or a favorite blanket) each time you do the training (so that the command, location and cues help to immediately calm the dog). You should use a head halter to help control, distract and calm the dog during training. Then at the time of the storm, use your commands, location, cues and head halter to try to calm the dog, while avoiding punishment or reassurance of the fearful response.

"At the time of the storm, use your commands, location, cues and head halter to try to calm the dog..."

Make sure that the environment is safe and secure at all times. Even the most placid dog can behave unpredictably when frightened by noise and, should he bolt and escape, he could be injured or lost.

Can I do anything to reduce the impact of the noise and flashes from the fireworks or storms?

At the approach of thunderstorm season, try to ensure that your dog has access to a well-curtained or blacked-out room when the storm begins. Blacking out the room removes the additional problems of flashing lights, flares etc.

Provide plenty of familiar toys and games that might help to distract the pet.

Try to arrange company for your dog rather than leaving him alone in the room.

Close all the windows and doors so the sound is muffled as much as possible. Try taking your pet to a room or area of the house where the stimuli will be at their mildest and the dog can be most easily distracted. Sometimes placing nested cardboard boxes or a blanket over the cage can greatly mute the sound. Be certain however that there is enough air circulation so that the pet does not overheat.

"Ignore the noises yourself and try to involve your pet in some form of active game."

Provide background noise from the radio or television. Rap or similar music with a lot of constant drum beats does help. The volume does not have to be loud as long as the music has a strong beat that acts as a distraction and prevents him from concentrating on the noises outside. Other background noises such as a fan running or even "white" noise devices can help to block outdoor noises.

Some products and exercises might be useful to further secure or calm the dog. Anxiety wraps, a cape or mat that reduces static, a head halter for control or TTouch therapy may help to calm the dog further. For many dogs, pheromone diffusers and/or collars can be useful.

Ignore the noises yourself and try to involve your pet in some form of active game.

My friend down the street has a dog that is not scared of loud noises and gets along well with mine. She has offered to lend me her dog for support. Shall I accept?

This may be an excellent strategy. Keeping the two together during the evenings may help. If you or your friend plays with the non-fearful dog when your own becomes scared, it may help to encourage him to join in and thus reduce his fear.

Is there anything else that I can do that is worthwhile?

Do not just ignore the problem because it only happens intermittently or for a few days each year.

"Institute a desensitization program once the season is over so that you ensure your dog loses fear of the situation."

Institute a desensitization program once the season is over so that you ensure your dog loses fear of the situation. Additional handouts are available that can help explain exactly how to go about this.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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