

It is not uncommon for dogs to be frightened of thunder, firecrackers, or other loud sounds. These types of fears may develop even though your dog has had no traumatic experiences associated with the sound. Many fear-related problems can be successfully resolved. However, if left untreated, 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, he tries to reduce his fear. He may try to escape to a place where the sounds of thunder or firecrackers are less intense. If, by leaving the yard or going into a certain room or area of the house, he feels less afraid, then the escape or destructive behavior is reinforced because it successfully lessens his 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.

Things that are present in the environment whenever your dog hears the startling noise can, from his viewpoint, become associated with the frightening sound. Over a period of time, she may become afraid of other things in the environment that she associates with the noise that frightens her. For example, dogs that 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 that are afraid of firecrackers may become afraid of the children who have the firecrackers or may become afraid to go in the backyard, if that is where they usually hear the noise.

Recommendations

- **Create A Safe Place:** Try to create a safe place for your dog to go to when he hears the noises that frighten him. But remember, this must be a safe location from his perspective, not yours. Notice where he goes, or tries to go, when he is frightened. If at all possible, give him access to that place. If he is trying to get inside the house, consider installing a dog door. If he is trying to get under your bed, give him 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 (a fan or radio playing will help block out the sound). Encourage him to go there when you are home and the thunder or other noise occurs. Feed him in that location and associate other "good things" happening there. He must be able to come and go from this location freely. Confining him in the "hidey-hole" when he does not 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" will not help them feel less fearful.
- **Distract Your Dog:** This method works best when your dog is just beginning to get anxious. Encourage him to engage in any activity that captures his attention and distracts him from behaving fearfully. Start when he first alerts you to the noise and is not yet showing a lot of fearful behavior, but is only watchful. Immediately try to interest him in doing something that he really enjoys. Get out the tennis ball and play fetch (in an escape proof area) or practice some commands that he knows. Give him a lot of praise and treats for paying attention to the game or the commands. As the storm or the noise builds, you may not be able to keep his 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 cannot keep his attention and he begins acting afraid, stop the process.

- **Behavior Modification:** Behavior modification techniques are often successful in reducing fears and phobias. The appropriate techniques are called “counter-conditioning” and “desensitization.” This means to condition or teach your dog to respond in non-fearful ways to sounds and other stimuli that previously frightened him. This must be done very gradually. Begin by exposing him to an intensity level of noise that does not frighten him and pair it with something pleasant, like a treat or a fun game. Gradually increase the volume as you continue to offer him something pleasant. Through this process, he will come to associate "good things" with the previously feared sound.

Example

- Search YouTube for videos of fireworks, thunder, or whatever noise is causing your dog stress.
- Play the video at such a low volume that your dog does not respond fearfully. While the tape is playing, feed him dinner, give him a treat, or play his favorite game.
- In your next session, play the tape a little louder while you feed him or play his favorite game.
- Continue increasing the volume through many sessions over a period of several weeks or months. If at any time while the tape is playing, he displays fearful behavior, stop. Begin your next session at a lower volume - one that does not produce anxiety - and proceed more slowly.

If these techniques are not used correctly, they will not be successful and can even make the problem worse. For some fears, it can be difficult to recreate the fear stimulus. For example, thunder is accompanied by changes in barometric pressure, lightning and rain, and your dog’s fearful response may be to the combination of these things and not just the thunder. You may need professional assistance to create and implement this kind of behavior modification program. If this is the case, please contact a certified dog trainer or animal behaviorist who uses positive reinforcement training techniques.

Consult Your Veterinarian

Medication may be available which can make your dog less anxious for short time periods. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your dog. Do not attempt to give your dog any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting your veterinarian. Animals do not respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for humans could be fatal to your dog. Drug therapy alone will not reduce fears and phobias permanently, but in extreme cases, behavior modification and medication used together might be the best approach.

What Not to Do

- Putting your dog in a crate to prevent him from being destructive during a thunderstorm is not recommended. He will still be afraid when he is in the crate and is likely to injure himself, perhaps even severely, while attempting to get out of the crate.
- Do not punish your dog for being afraid. Punishment will only make him more fearful.
- Do not try to force your dog to experience or be close to the sound that frightens him. For example, making him stay close to a group of children who are lighting firecrackers will only make him more afraid, and could cause aggressive in an attempt to escape from the situation.
- Obedience classes will not make your dog less afraid of thunder or other noises, but could help boost his general confidence.