

Thunder-phobia and Fear of Loud Noises



Why is my dog scared of loud noises/thunder?

Noises that are loud and sudden can trigger very basic survival instincts in some dogs. Thunder is created by lightning and lightning can kill you, so running away from the loud noise isn't a bad choice. This is why the most common noises that tend to cause extreme fear in dogs are fireworks, gunshots, and thunder.

Additionally, when it comes to thunderstorms dogs experience them differently than we do. If the air becomes statically charged, think about what happens to the hair on your head. Your dog is entirely covered in hair! Their senses are also much more sensitive, so the noise is probably louder for them and the smell in the air changes. Dogs can even sense a drop in barometric pressure; the experience must be overwhelming.

While being in a state of fear is very distressing for your dog, they also often damage or destroy things like doors, windows, or bedding when afraid in either an effort to cope or escape from the noise. This can be especially problematic because dogs have been known to do great harm to themselves during their destruction in these situations, so it is important to begin to address the underlying fear as soon as possible.

Tips for Managing Noise Fears.

How to do it.

Tip 1. Give your dog a safe space to retreat to when he is frightened. Most dogs like to "hide" somewhere when they are afraid, such as under a bed or in a covered crate. Insulation such as blankets can help dampen the noise a bit, however, do not "trap" the dog in the safe place by shutting a door or closing the crate. Fearful dogs can go into "escape-mode" once they think they are stuck and it makes the situation worse.

Tip 2. Try to reduce the volume of the noise. If the noise is thunder outside, bring your dog inside and close the doors and windows. Turn on the radio or the TV to create ambient noise.

Tip 3. Distract your dog with a food puzzle to focus on while the storm or noise is going on. See our handout on interactive feeders for more info.

Tip 4. Consider using anxiety aids to help increase your dog's feeling of calm. See our Anxiety Aids handout for more info.

Tip 5. Be careful when reassuring your dog. Many dogs interpret our efforts to reassure them as praise for their fearful behavior; "it's okay, you're fine" becomes "it's okay to be afraid, that's good!" The best thing you can do to reassure your dog that everything is fine is by *acting like IT IS fine* and being calm, but there to support your dog if he needs someone to be around.

Tip 6. Don't punish your dog for being afraid. Yelling at him or punishing him for the destruction or behavior he does when afraid will not make his fear go away, and will confirm for him that the situation is scary!

Tip 7. Don't force your dog to "just get over it" by exposing your dog to the noise until he "stops being afraid". This is very dangerous and can traumatize your dog or even cause him to become aggressive to escape.

Reducing the Fear

How to do it.

In order to actually change your dog's fearful behavior in response to loud noises, we want to change how he feels about the noise. We can do that by pairing the noise at a low level with something that triggers a different emotion in your dog.

Before you begin, you will need a sound recording of the particular noise your dog is afraid of and either your dog's meal in a slow feeder or treats in a stuffed rubber toy such as a Kong. Recordings of some noises can be purchased online as CDs or MP3 sounds. Thunder noises are readily available because they are often used as a "relaxing sound" for spas or meditation ambiance.

Step 1. Play the noise recording for your dog at a loud enough level that he notices it, but doesn't become stressed or anxious.

Step 2. Give your dog the food puzzle or slow feeder and let him eat it while the sound is playing. Once he has finished allow the sound to play a moment longer and if your dog is still calm, stop the recording of the noise.

Step 3. Repeat steps 1 & 2, and gradually over several sessions, increase the volume of the noise, but only as long as your dog doesn't become distressed. Also, gradually increase the amount of time you play the noise for, so that your dog is able to be calm for longer periods of time, regardless of whether he has finished his food or not.

Training Tip: It is a good idea to keep a log of your training sessions so that you can track how long each session went and what volume level the noise was for each session. It is important to go very slow and gradual while you increase the time and noise volume; dogs make better progress in seconds than in minutes.

Troubleshooting: It is extremely important that your dog not be triggered into a fearful state during training; it can actually make your dog even more fearful of the noise and harder to get under control or change. Also, if you are still in early stages of training and you know that your dog is going to be exposed to the noise (I.E a thunderstorm is rolling in) then do everything you can to manage the behavior using the tips above and at your next training session, go back a few steps to start out.

Troubleshooting: Sometimes the noise alone isn't the only trigger. For instance; thunderstorms also have changes in barometric pressure, humidity, and smell that signal they are coming, and these things are difficult to copy as part of the training. This is why most severe noise phobias require professional help to address.

****The information presented here is for supportive and informative purposes only; it is not intended to diagnose treat or cure any behavioral issue and is not a substitute for professional help. With any behavior problem that persists or worsens, please seek help from a qualified behavior professional.***