



Noise Phobias

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.

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, even if that place doesn't exist. This may mean she hides in the closet during a fireworks show or busts through your fence in the backyard in a panic. 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 may 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.

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 is frightened, and if at all possible, give her access to that place. If she is trying to get under your bed, give her access and allow her to hide under the bed. 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 her to go there when you are home and the thunder or other noise occurs. Feed her in that location to help her associate that other good things happen to her there. She must be able to come and go from this location freely. Confining her in the "hidey-hole" when she does not want to be there will only give her reason to be more afraid or panic. 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. Work with your dog and help them be as comfortable as possible.

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 tricks that she knows. Give her a lot of praise and high value treats for participating in the game. As the storm or the 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 cannot keep her attention and she begins acting afraid, stop the process. You can continue giving her treats (you cannot reinforce fearful behavior), but don't expect her to perform for them. At this point you will just be reinforcing that fireworks or other loud noises just mean she gets something tasty.

Behavior Modification

Behavior modification techniques are often successful in reducing fears and phobias. The appropriate techniques are called counter-conditioning and desensitization which help your dog form more positive associations with the noises that scare her. This process involves lots of little steps, so be patient and celebrate the small successes. Begin by exposing her to an intensity level of noise that does not frighten her and pair it with something pleasant, like a treat or a fun game. You can use online videos at a very low volume to start this process. Gradually increase the volume over the weeks as you continue to offer her something pleasant. Through this process, she will come to associate good things with the previously feared sound.

Example:

- Make a tape or find an online video with firecracker or thunder noises on it.
- Play the tape at such a low volume that your dog does not respond fearfully. While the tape is playing, feed her dinner, give her a treat or play her favorite game.
- In your next session, play the tape a little louder while you feed her or play her 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, she 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 sound of thunder itself. You may need professional assistance to create and implement this kind of behavior modification program.

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 suggest and 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

- Don't allow yourself to be worried or upset when you see your dog upset. It can be tough, but stay brave for her! Instead, try to behave normally as if you do not notice her fearfulness or the noises that are scaring her. If she sees you aren't worried, it will help her to stay calm as well.
- Don't put your dog in a crate to prevent her from being destructive during a thunderstorm. She will still be afraid when she is in the crate and is likely to injure herself, perhaps even severely, while attempting to get out of the crate. If the crate is already an established safe place for her, you can leave it open for her to seek out if she chooses.
- Do not punish your dog for being afraid. Punishment will only make her more fearful (and confused).
- Do not try to force your dog to experience or be close to the sound that frightens her. For example, making her stay close to a group of children who are lighting firecrackers will only make her more afraid, and could cause her to panic or react poorly 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 her general confidence.

These approaches do not work because they do not decrease your dog's fear. Merely trying to prevent her from escaping or being destructive will not work. If she is still afraid, she will continue to show that fear in whatever way she can (digging, jumping, climbing, chewing, barking, howling).

Professional Help

If your dog has **severe** fears and phobias and you are unable to achieve success with the techniques we have outlined here, you should contact a certified dog trainer or behavior consultant.