BEHAVIOR SERIES

Helping Your Dog Overcome Fear of Thunder and Other Startling Noises

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, unexpected 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 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 inside the house, consider installing a dog door. 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.

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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 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 periods 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 "counterconditioning" and "desensitization." These techniques condition or teach your dog to respond in nonfearful ways to sounds and other stimuli that have previously frightened her.

These techniques must be implemented very gradually. Begin by exposing your dog to an intensity level of noise that doesn't frighten her and pairing the noise with something pleasant, like a treat or a fun game. Gradually increase the volume as you continue to offer her something pleasant. Through this process, she'll come to associate "good things" with the previously feared sound.

Here's an Example of How to Do This

- Make a tape with firecracker noises on it.
- Play the tape at such a low volume that your dog doesn't 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 she displays fearful behavior at any time while the tape is playing, STOP. Begin your next session at a lower volume, one that doesn't produce anxiety, and proceed more slowly.

If these techniques aren't used correctly, they won't be successful and can even make the problem worse.

For some fears, it can be difficult to re-create the fear stimulus. For example, thunder is accompanied by lightning, rain, and changes in barometric pressure; 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.

Consult Your Veterinarian

Medication may help reduce your dog's anxiety levels for short time periods. Your veterinarian is the only person who is qualified and licensed to prescribe medication for your dog. Don't attempt to give your dog any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting your veterinarian. Animals don't 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 won't reduce fears and phobias permanently, but in extreme cases, behavior modification and medication used together might be the best approach.

What Not to Do

- Do not attempt to reassure your dog when she is afraid. This may only reinforce her fearful behavior. If you pet, soothe, or give her treats when she's behaving fearfully, she may interpret this as a reward for her fearful behavior. Instead, try to behave normally, as if you don't notice her fearfulness.
- Do not put your dog in a crate to prevent her from being destructive during a thunderstorm. She'll still be fearful when she's in the crate and is likely to injure herself, perhaps even severely, while attempting to get out of the crate.
- Do not punish your dog for being afraid. Punishment will only make her more fearful.
- 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 become aggressive in an attempt to escape from the situation.

These approaches will fail because they won't decrease your dog's fear. Merely trying to prevent her from escaping or being destructive won't work, either. If your dog is still afraid, she'll continue to show that fear in whatever way she can—whether by digging, jumping, climbing, chewing, barking, or howling. Finally, know that formal training won't make your dog less afraid of thunder or other noises, although it could help boost her general confidence.

Animal-Behavior Specialist

If your dog has severe fears and phobias and you're unable to achieve success with the techniques outlined here, you should consult with an animal-behavior specialist and your veterinarian.

This information provided for you by

Animal Humane
NEW MEXICO

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