



Fear of Thunderstorms

It's not an easy thing to conquer, but planning ahead is wise.

Author: Dr. Hett for the *Dog Watch*

Every year, starting in late spring or early summer, we receive calls from worried owners concerning their dogs' panicked reaction to thunderstorms. By the time these owners call about these problems, it may already be too late to do much more that year than try to manage their dog's behavior. The best time to work on decreasing a dog's fear of thunder or fireworks is in the "off-season" – when the dog isn't experiencing these events on a semi-regular basis. So now's the time to get started.

The most appropriate behavior modification techniques for fears and phobias are counter conditioning and desensitization. These techniques are most effective when the dog can be prevented from experiencing a full-blown phobias or fearful reaction, which is why the "off-season" is the ideal time to address your dog's problem.

The difficulty with using these procedures for noise phobias is in the implementation. Desensitization requires that a noise be present to the dog at a level that does not elicit fear. The only reasonable method to do this with thunder and fireworks is to use recorded sounds. The better the quality of the recording and of your sound system, the more realistic these noises will sound to your dog. Other sounds – such as a pop gun – can sometimes be good substitutes for recording of fireworks.

Each expression of the noise from the recording should be immediately followed by something that elicits a happy response from your dog. This could be throwing a favorite toy for him to fetch, playing tug or offering an irresistible tidbit. Following the noise with a "good thing" is the counter conditioning part of the equation. The goal is to change your dog's emotional state from upset to calm and happy.

Your dog must learn to anticipate that a quieter version of the sound he fears predicts that something good will follow. When he is displaying this anticipatory reaction without appearing anxious, it's time to raise the volume just a touch. Don't expect to have good results with these procedures if you work with your dog only occasionally, or do only a few pairings of noise with the "good thing". Consistency and many repetitions are required for success.

You may find yourself faced with a couple of stumbling blocks. First, the recorded rendition of the noises may not sound realistic to your dog, so he may not react to them no matter how loud they are. You might need to experiment with different recording to find one that your dog will respond to. Second, in the case of thunder phobias, many dogs have generalized their fear to other elements of the storms, such as the wind or just the "feel" of the air prior to a storm. If you've encountered these hurdles with your dog, what alternatives are available to you?

Create a Safe Haven

One possibility is to create a “safe haven” for your dog and encourage him to use it. This could be an interior basement room outfitted with sound-dampening materials (decorative options are available). My Irish setter Blaze used to hide under the kitchen table; other dogs seek out a bathroom. Try to accommodate your dog’s choice of a place to hide.

For some dogs, the answer is anti-anxiety medication during storm season, combined with behavior modification. This is not an ideal approach, but sometimes it is the best available. Of you choose this option, I’d recommend starting medication and behavior modification early in the season rather than allowing your dog to have a number of panic reactions before intervening.

Whatever solution you choose, take action sooner rather than later. The degree of panic some dogs experience is truly life-threatening, as they attempt to escape their yards and sometimes jump out of windows. Now is the time to seek help from a veterinarian or certified behavior consultant in beginning a behavior modification program – before thunderstorm season strikes.