

Storm & Fireworks Phobia

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Many dogs become storm-phobic only after fully-grown. A common age group is around ages 4 or 5, so it is quite possible for an adult dog to become afraid of nasty weather.

Never count on a dog just "getting over it." You lose valuable training time if you wait. Sound phobia is on-going and often indicates other issues as well.

Medications or homeopathic remedies like Distress Remedy, Tranquil Pet, Be Calm, Calming Essence or melatonin can be useful but are difficult to administer on an as-needed basis since in a normal summer here in Florida we get heavy rainstorms every day for many months in this sub-tropical climate. Always consult your veterinarian for help. Dr. Jean Dodds recommends 3 mg melatonin daily during thunderstorm season or on a per-storm basis.

If you happen to be home as a storm is approaching, or if you are fortunate enough to have more warning of storms in your area it certainly can't hurt. Some brands are also appropriate for daily use. If you wanted to use something regularly, Distress Remedy and Calming Essence are good choices. The best time to provide the remedies is before fireworks or storms begin.

It is crucial to keep your dog in a safe, indoor area, possibly crated, during storms and likely fireworks holidays. If your dog has this problem, he should never go with you to a fireworks display.

Ignore fearful behavior that seems to spring from nowhere, that has no valid cause.

Here are some behavioral training storm desensitizing tips, gathered here in thunderstorm/lightning prone Central Florida:

For dogs sensitive to noisy thunder you can play sound effects tapes, softly at first during doggie meal times then gradually increase the volume (and this is helpful for dogs that compete in conformation, agility, obedience, field, whatever!). We have noticed a definite difference in the level of the dogs' reactions when we play CD's as opposed to audiotapes. The difference in quality of sound really seems to matter to the dogs, so use the CD if possible.

Flip your home's electrical breaker while rewarding dog (like the power flickering on and off) because it makes appliances cycle up and electronic equipment reset as well as affecting lights (turn off sensitive electronics like computers first, of course).

Get a barometer and train and reward the dog when it drops even when no storm results.

Put the dog in a wire crate with a damp towel between the metal pan and the hard floor (grounding out ionization of the air), or get an air ionization unit.

Make popcorn during the next few storms and share it with your dogs while you play games together. We feed grain free foods, but figure our dogs that can handle it can sometimes get junk food just like us!

Practice his obedience tricks with lots of yummy stuff flowing, since eating releases endorphins so automatically helps the dog relax. Start with his simple skills like sit, down and stand, and work up his scent articles, focus and distraction training, short go outs inside, freestyle heeling and dancing with your dog.

If you have a dog without these issues, or a friend who can come over or who will let you borrow a dog, you can set up some play dates and share dog training time to help your fearful dog.

Unless your dog gets frequent upset tummies, a veterinary behavior specialist recommends giving him a high-carbohydrate meal in the afternoon and add some vitamin B-6.

Do a canine massage session. For tips on canine massage, contact Robert DiFonzo of Movement Improvement for a demonstration and treatment. His practice includes canine adjustments, infrasound, ultrasound, needle-free acupuncture and laser therapy all in the same sessions. We also recommend Angela Wills' how-to video available at www.caninemassage.com.

Play with a strobe light or the flash from your camera (fringe benefits for show pictures here!).

The goal is to gradually expose the dog to things that are making him nervous, but begin the exposure in such a mild fashion or from so far away that he does not obviously react. For instance, when working on the sound aspect, start softly as recommended. You may also use a toy cap pistol for some of the sound desensitization work, but muffle the toy under pillows or blankets, or inside a cardboard tube or box.

Punishment, including stressful admonishment, is likely to make the problem worse. The dog will then know he was right to be afraid.

Comforting a fearful dog is rewarding the nervous reaction if it is the long-term way of dealing with the problem.

Ignore reactions as much as you can and move further away from the set up noise, which is easier if you have a helper to click then treat the dog for ignoring the scary sounds.

Continue to reinforce good behavior, gradually stretching out the reinforcement schedule so the treats and games are not needed as often. Train and desensitize to sounds often and all year, long before Independence Day, New Year's Eve and the summer storm season.

Most important, if you are nervous about storms yourself, learn to hide it from your dogs.

During storm season, if you have to be away from your dog, put him in a dog crate in a room with black-out window coverings to hide flashes of light. Leave some white noise on like the t.v. speakers or i-pod player. We especially like the t.v. speakers which we leave on while the t.v. is off, playing the sound through the satellite box tuned to a shopping channel, where the hosts sound cheerful all day long.

By P.J. Lacette
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