

Nervous Dogs & Fireworks, Storms, Gunfire

by P.J. Lacette

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Most dogs should be kept away from all fireworks, to protect them from careless humans. On-leash walks are critical, as they are during storms or near hunting preserves or gun ranges.

Consult your veterinarian right away if you are considering tranquilizers for your pet – don't wait until the last minute.

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. Some have mild fears and can be easily distracted with favorite games, toys and positive attention, but the reactions can be extreme, and as with separation-anxiety dogs, may result in dogs escaping through windows or doors.

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

Natural herbal and/or homeopathic remedies may help with some dogs. We have used Distress Remedy and Rescue Remedy for some dogs, and many others are now available online.

Start adding the recommended dose to the dog's food and water a few days before, during and after any stressful event such as a firework-filled evening. For storm phobic dogs, we put some in the water every day during our long rainy season, or if at home when the storm clouds gather we will follow the directions on the bottle about an extra dose. Some interesting results are showing up with the use of melatonin, which may be helpful for several stress-related issues. Used to treat depression and self-injury in children, it affects neurotransmitters, especially dopamine and serotonin, which influence behavior. A high dopamine level is connected to agitation and restlessness. Avoid using with other medications or if the dog has an autoimmune disease. See your vet for the recommended dosage.



Dr. Jean Dodds recommends 3 mg melatonin daily during thunderstorm season or on a per-storm basis. (The web address for her organization which we frequently consult is hemopet.org, a great source for dog owners.)

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.

Snuffle-soothing mats are full of long fabric tufts. You drop dry dog food down in the mats to keep a dog occupied

and distracted from the scary surrounding. We carry the mats at Best Paw Forward Inc. but we don't ship items. You can also order them from Pawsome Quilts @pawsomequilts on Facebook, which also has lots of other great doggie items like custom-made quilts.

Body wraps are also now available in stores and online. Both the mats and the wraps help some dogs cope with their fears but should only be used when you are present and closely watching your dog to avoid having a dog chew up and ingest fabric.

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

Try hard to limit your obvious reactions to fearful behavior that seems to spring from nowhere, that has no valid cause to you – your dog has some reason, and extensive, effusive reactions can make it a self-fulfilling prophecy to a nervous canine.

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

- For dogs sensitive to noisy thunder, play sound effects recordings of storms
 - Softly at first during doggie mealtimes then gradually increase volume
 - Helpful for dogs that compete in conformation, agility, obedience/rally, field, dock diving, trick dog, barn hunt etc.
 - Definite difference in dogs' reactions with good sound systems
- Flip home's electrical breaker while rewarding dog (simulates power flickering on and off in storm
 - Makes appliances cycle, electronic equipment reset, home goes dark
 - Turn off sensitive electronics like computers first
- Get a barometer. Train & reward dog when it drops even when no storm results
- Put dog in wire crate with a damp towel between the metal pan or crate bottom & 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 occasional junk food like corn is to dogs is warranted for a good cause if there are no allergies to consider
- Play with a strobe light or the flash from your smart phone or camera (fringe benefits for show pictures here!)
- Train the dog some more! Practice obedience tricks with lots of yummy stuff flowing, since eating releases endorphins so automatically helps the dog relax. Start with simple skills like sit, down, stand. Work up to scent articles, touch games with nose and paws, 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 more dog training time to help your fearful dog.

The goal is to gradually expose the dog to things that are making him nervous, starting exposure in such a mild fashion or from so far away that he does not obviously react (in behavior terms that is called staying under threshold) as you build his confidence with his new skills.

For instance, when working on the sound aspect, start softly as recommended. Use a toy cap pistol or recordings of fireworks and gunfire for sound desensitization work, again with the volume very low at first.

Punishment, including yelling or fussing at your dog, is likely to make the problem worse. Now your dog knows he was right to be afraid (just look at how stressed you are, he thinks!).

Comforting a fearful dog is rewarding the nervous reaction if it is the long-term way of dealing with the problem, though of course turning cuddling into productive learning is useful with the help of a clicker and treats!

Ignore reactions as much as you can and move further away or turn down the volume again on sound effects as you 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 (yep, that dirty word again) 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 must 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 to hear the cheerful voices on a shopping channel host all day long.

Just remember to hide the credit cards from the dog before you leave for work...

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