



### **How To Help Your Dogs Through Fireworks, Thunderstorms, and More!**

As Americans get ready to celebrate the 4th of July, the issue of fireworks and reactive pets is a topic of conversation and also a source of anxiety for many pet owners. I have already heard from concerned pet owners, and starting to see posts online from pet owners getting nervous about the impending holiday. As we live in Florida, we are also entering the afternoon thunderstorm season which can also make animals very anxious.

So, what is happening? Fireworks are not new, and people have had dogs for centuries. So what has changed? Why so many scared dogs? From my vantage point as a third-generation professional animal trainer, I believe it is how we are dealing with our animals. It has become commonplace to be very emotional with our animals. We also tend to lower the bar in our training and interactions with our dogs. For me, the answer always lies in training a great foundation, being very practical and pragmatic, setting a high bar, and leading/setting the tone.

After an exhaustive search online, I saw numerous videos and posts from professionals and animal owners about how to deal with fireworks and noises. What I found interesting, and so disappointing, is that I was hard pressed to find any professionals address the behavior of the person in charge of the animal. This is my starting point and, in my opinion and experience, one of the best tools you have to keep your pet calm.

So, what does this look like? How can you relate this to your dog being scared of fireworks and more?

Start with a GREAT foundation training program. Whether you have a puppy, older dog, or even a rescue. Yes you can teach an old dog new tricks! I will digress here for a moment as to the 'WHY' on this point and the importance. I am sure you love your dog and want the best for them. If you hire me to help with your dog, I will tell you the first day I meet you for training, my job is to help you train your dog with a great foundation (and possibly more) as this is by far the most loving and responsible thing you can do for them. Yes, get a dog with the idea you will have them for life, but since you don't have a crystal ball, understand that even if your dog doesn't live with you in the future, a well-trained animal will usually have a good life. The shelters are not full of well-trained animals. On the contrary, even if you see a cute little purebred at the shelter, chances are it is because their human failed them by not creating some rules and boundaries through a good training program. I will expand upon this in the next issue.

#### ***Now, back to fireworks!***

Read on for a full list of tips and considerations that may help you with a worried or anxious animal...

As time permits, train/role play these scary things prior to the event. We have the luxury of putting on YouTube to play fireworks sounds and thunderstorms which is a start.

- Your body language/attitude is crucial... First, be very matter of fact. Employ strong positive energy and body language. The worst thing you can do is be reactive or nervous and talk in a high soft voice trying to calm down your animal. They are looking for leadership! The best thing you can do is be very calm, and direct no energy towards the noise or distraction. Try to get their eyes – look at you. Make eye contact and hold it. I can promise you if you are successful with this alone, you will see a change in your pet!

- Practice! Before the day of the fireworks, and hopefully days ahead if not weeks, play some YouTube videos or audio of fireworks, storms, noise, etc. Start with it low. Ideally, do this after your animal has been walked or worked. Initially, sit with your dog on a leash. Distract them with commands, a puzzle treat board, or fetching. Then as they calm down, go about your routine and be sure NOT to give the noise any of your attention. 10-20 mins a few times a day would be appropriate not to overdo it. Turn up the volume a bit as they get comfortable.
  - I suggest you put a leash on your dog as we don't want them to scurry around. Better they stay near/by you, or even in their kennel where they could see/hear you. Scurrying around scared just helps them feed on their nervousness.

On the day of the fireworks (or before a big storm later in the day) ...

- Get a good workout with your animal on the day of the fireworks. It will be beneficial to both of you if you expend some energy. Anxiety feeds from unused energy. Go an extra mile or more on your walk or ride, or whatever you do to use energy and get them (and you) tired!
- Distract your dog during the noise with favorite treats, Kong toys with treats they work for, lick mats, playing fetch, or other activities your dog enjoys. Be very 'business as usual'. Again, don't give any of your attention to the noise. Pet them and reassure them as needed in a fun, level tone. I have a tendency to say in a calm but firm voice – "You're fine" in my reassurance.
  - An analogy I use - Think about having a young child with you. Something scary is ahead or happening and the child gets scared. They look at you. If you act scared or nervous, they will likely get even more anxious. Another, better option would be to look back at them and hold their eyes and tell them in a firm, steady voice– "hey, look at me - we got this. Just listen to me and we will get through this" or something similar. I challenge you to try this with your dog and see the results!
- Utilize music or TV to drown out the noise a bit and distract both you and the animal. Do some breathing exercises to maintain your own calm. The more you can maintain a – 'business as usual demeanor', the more likely your animal will not be as reactive. They are watching/feeling your energy at all times!
- You can also put your dog in their kennel if they are kennel trained and find it a comfortable place, and are not overly frightened and just need their 'safe' place.
- If your dog is not in the kennel, put a leash on them so they do not take off or go hide. It is better if you keep them by you and keep distracting them and talking to them very matter of fact.
- Just to be safe, secure your doors and windows or anywhere a really nervous dog or cat can escape. Although your dog may never have jumped their fenced area, if they get too nervous, they could very well try to escape. Better to keep them inside during the noise.

**NOTE: the 4th of July timeframe sees more pets escape than any other time of the year!**

- For your dog, really consider whether your dog should attend a firework event with you. Is this really for the dog, or for you? Most experts suggest you do not bring them along. If you are determined to do this, they should be very comfortable with not only the noise, but also the excited energy of the crowd.
- If your dog is excessively nervous, and the time is too short to really work on their training and desensitizing, you may want to ask your vet for some light medication, and be sure to combine this with the strategies noted above. I personally have not had to do this, but there are situations where it can be helpful. The challenge is this option is way too commonplace for my comfort level. A solid training program for both the animal and their people works 99% of the time!

(If you have to do this, I strongly advise that over the next couple of months you really undertake a dedicated training program with role playing, or hire a professional trainer to get you on the right track. Concentrate on ensuring a great foundation - no matter the age of your animal! You can teach an old dog new tricks 😊)

For dogs, I highly recommend the AKC Canine Good Citizen. A great step by step program for foundation training, to achieve a well-behaved, well-adjusted dog! (I am an AKC CGC Evaluator)  
<https://www.akc.org/.../training.../canine-good-citizen/>

By ensuring that your animal has a solid foundation, a very 'matter of fact' vs emotional human, spending the time to imprint a young animal, and role playing prior to real events, you will no doubt find you have a much calmer animal. You will also likely find that not only are they more comfortable with loud noises and events, they are generally better behaved, and this may also help with separation anxiety, disrespect, and other issues as well. That is a win-win for sure!

I challenge you to try this approach instead of drugs, thunder vests, etc. I'd love to hear from you if this helped out. I certainly wish you and your entire human and animal families a pleasant experience this 4th of July.

God Bless all you awesome dog owners, and GOD BLESS AMERICA!

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