



How to help your dogs and horses through fireworks, thunderstorms, and loud noises

For our Canadian friends, this Friday, July 1st is Canada Day. Americans are getting ready to celebrate the 4th of July on Monday. Both of these days involve fireworks and lots of hoopla. I am already hearing from, and seeing posts from dog and horse owners about their concerns.

I live in Florida and we have been having regular afternoon thunderstorms which can also make animals and people very anxious.

Fireworks are not a new trend, and people have had dogs and horses for centuries. So what has changed that so many people are reporting that their dogs are very nervous and scared? 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. For me, the answer always lies in being very practical, 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, not a single one addressed how the person in charge of the animal is acting. This is my starting point and, in my opinion as a professional animal trainer, one of the best tools you have to keep your pet calm.

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

- Body language/attitude of the owner... First, be very matter of fact. Employ a 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 matter of fact, calm, and direct no energy towards the noise or distraction.
- 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. Go about your routine and do not give the noise any of your attention. 10-20 mins would be appropriate to not over do it. You could do this a few times a day. Turn it up a bit as they get comfortable.
- 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 off of unused energy. Go an extra mile or more on your walk or ride, or whatever you do to use energy and get them 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.
For your horse, give them feed or hay. 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.
- 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

- You can also put your dog in their kennel if they are kennel trained and find it a comfortable place. Your horse can be kept in a stall or a paddock they cannot jump out of. I would not recommend trying to hold your horse on a lead rope if they are reactive.
- 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 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.
- For horses, you may be at a fair showing or event where there are going to be noises, fireworks, etc. The absolute best thing you can do will have been a solid training and desensitizing program, and stay very matter of fact. They will be feeding off your energy!
- If your dog or horse 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, the AKC Canine Good Citizen is a great program to model for a great foundation and a well-behaved and well-adjusted dog!) <https://www.akc.org/.../training.../canine-good-citizen/>

For horses, I am a fan of Downunder Horsemanship's Method training. It is thorough and effective!

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'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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