

93 Dog Behavior Problems – Fears and Phobias

Storms and Fireworks – Treatment

For further discussion on why fears and phobias develop and how they might be prevented, see (91) Fears and Phobias – Inanimate Noises and Places and (6) Fears, Phobias, and Anxiety.

How are fireworks or thunderstorm fears and phobias treated?

“Start this treatment at a time of year when fireworks or thunderstorms are not likely to occur.”

Treatment for this problem is through systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning (see (19) Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning, (20) Implementing Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning – Setting Up for Success, and (91) Fears and Phobias – Inanimate Noises and Places).

When is the best time to start treatment?

This should be started at a time of year when fireworks or thunderstorms are not likely to occur so that you have control over the situation and time to work on your retraining program, without having to worry about how to deal with actual events (see (92) Fears and Phobias – Storms and Fireworks – Immediate Guidelines).

How does counter-conditioning work?

Although the training is primarily aimed at exposing the pet to gradually more intense levels of the stimuli while it remains relaxed, pairing a specific favorite reward with each training session can help the pet to develop a positive and enjoyable association with the stimulus. By identifying and saving the pet's special treat for each desensitization session, your dog should ultimately look forward to each new exposure to these muted levels of the stimulus (counter-conditioning). Reinforcer assessment (identifying your dog's favored reinforcers) can help you to decide which rewards should be used for a counter-conditioning program, with the less favored rewards used for other forms of training.

How do I start this systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning program?



“If you cannot get your pet to settle and relax in the absence of the fear-evoking stimuli, it will not be practical to begin your exposure exercises.”



The dog is first trained to “sit” and “watch,” lie down and relax, or go to a mat to settle in the absence of distractions. Remember to always reward the dog for performing the correct behavior. Initially food rewards may be used, but later soothing praise is the best reward. Once your dog can achieve a settled behavior and a calm emotional state, you should test the training in the face of some distraction. Some owners and handlers find that success occurs faster and more consistently throughout the program by using a restraint and control device such as a head halter. In practice, if you cannot get your pet to settle and relax in the absence of the fear-evoking stimuli, it will not be practical to begin your exposure exercises (see (61) Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training).

When choosing a location for training, consider where it might be practical to begin CD desensitization and where it might be practical to have your dog settle to minimize stimuli during the storm. Training your dog to relax on a mat or bed may be particularly useful since the bedding area may further help the dog to relax and settle (e.g., go to your mat). A portable mat can be moved to other locations and used for other situations (e.g., when you are travelling or a dog during actual storms can be moved to another location if needed (e.g., when you are traveling). See (50) Crate Training – Positive Confinement – Why to Crate Train, (51) Crate Training – Guide – How to Crate Train, (52) Crate Training – Synopsis, and (69) Traveling – Air and Car Travel.

How do I organize the distraction?

Once you can reliably get your dog to settle and relax, try simple distractions such as having another member of the family or even another pet, if available, approach. Once you are confident that your dog will remain in a relaxed sit or down stay or settle onto its bed on cue (command), then desensitization may begin.

Put your dog on the “relax” command and have an assistant praise your dog and reassure it for staying calm. If the correct response is not achieved, you might need to go back several steps until you are sure that your assistant is able to get your dog to “sit” and “relax,” which is the first part of the program.

How do I organize desensitization?

For fireworks fears, either you can use a variety of audio and video recordings of the noise or a cap gun, whichever is capable of reproducing the fear response. Commercial CDs are available that reproduce these sounds for desensitization training (see (11) Behavior Management Products).

It is important to start with a noise at a volume that does not elicit any distress. The initial sound sometimes may be barely audible. For this reason, it is probably better to have a CD or video of a fireworks display rather than using a cap gun. For gunshot fears and phobias however, a cap gun or starter’s pistol may ultimately be best since it also provides the visual cue of a gun. In these instances, you can start the desensitization by playing a recording of gun sounds at a minimal volume. Another choice would be to muffle the sound of a cap gun or starter’s pistol using cardboard boxes and towels. A “surround-sound” recording system is more likely to produce a sound that is most similar to the actual stimulus (fireworks).

This same technique can also be used for thunderstorm phobias, using a video or audio recording of an actual storm. It is much harder to reproduce a realistic thunderstorm for retraining, since noise is not the only component of a thunderstorm. During a thunderstorm, there are also changes in barometric pressure, the sound of rain on the windows, darkening skies and flashes or bolts of lightning. Not all of these events can be reproduced with video or audio, and therefore not all dogs will respond to desensitization sessions using recordings.

Begin playing the recording or producing the appropriate sounds at a low volume. If your dog reacts, ignore the reaction until your pet is settled, after which it can be given a treat. Once the dog has settled, try again with a much lower volume of the stimulus. It is useful to use a head halter and leash to maintain control and ensure that the dog focuses on you.

“It is probably better to have a CD or video of a fireworks display rather than using a cap gun.”

How long do I repeat this part of the program?

It is important that you do not overdo it. After every few bangs, give a special treat, play with the dog, or initiate some particularly pleasurable activity. Make this the end of your first session. It is important you always end a session on a high note with a good response, even if that means turning the volume right down again.

When do I start the next session?

This depends very much on the individual dog. It can be as short a time as an hour or as long as the next day. It is important not to leave too long a gap between training sessions, but the dog must be calm and settled before another session is begun.

What happens in the new session?

The new session is started with the same level of noise but this is soon increased slightly, bearing in mind that it is important not to go beyond the point when your dog may notice the sound and react. If this happens you will need to go back several steps and start with the noise at a much lower volume.

Keep repeating the process, increasing the volume only slightly each time.

What should I expect?

It is important not to expect too much, too soon. As a general rule you should not try to do more than three or four sessions in a block.

How long will this training program take?

You have to accept from the outset that the program will take days if not weeks or even months but **eventually your dog should remain relaxed at full intensity noises**. Once you have reached this point it is important to reinforce the good response on an occasional basis.

How often do I have to do this reinforcement?

Initially it has to be quite frequently, but with time this can be less often. Reinforcements should be done shortly before the rainy or festive season.

What should I do if I don't appear to be making any progress?

If you seem to be having any problems, consult your veterinarian for further advice or help. Sometimes sound sensitivity may be associated with both medical and more general psychological problems.

What happens if I haven't managed to get my dog trained in time?

This is not an uncommon problem and we have prepared a fact sheet for just such a situation (see (92) Fears and Phobias – Storms and Fireworks – Immediate Guidelines). Drugs and pheromones may be an option to help the dog improve more quickly or to help the dog better handle fireworks and thunderstorm events that arise before the program has been successfully completed.

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Can drugs be helpful?

Drugs might be used in different scenarios. While the pet is being retrained, especially if there is any chance of exposure to actual stimuli (e.g., thunderstorm season) it might be advisable to use an antidepressant to help your dog cope with its phobias and to help it better focus in its training. These drugs can take a month or more to achieve efficacy so should be started well in advance. Adding natural anxiolytic compounds such as melatonin, the pheromone Adaptil™ or even aromatherapy might also help. Before any expected exposure to the stimuli, an anxiolytic drug might also be used on an as-needed basis.

Are there other products that might be useful?

In addition to developing a calming area and the use of desensitization CDs, other products have been developed as aids for calming dogs and reducing thunderstorm phobias. These include the Thundershirt or “anxiety wrap,” which is intended to reduce anxiety via applying pressure to the dog’s body, a “Storm Defender” cape, which is intended to reduce static associated with storms and a “Calming Cap” or Doggles which when placed over the dog’s eyes, reduces some of the visual stimuli.