

Introduction

Many dogs are tragically fearful of storms, especially those that incorporate thunder and lightning. Fears can also develop in response to other noises such as fireworks, cap guns and gun shots.

When scared by noises, dogs will often do all they can to get comfort or to escape the storm. They will seek to come inside the house with you if you are home and your comfort will often be all they need, but what if the dog is left alone during a storm? Such dogs are at grave risk.

Even if your dog does not attempt to escape, there are steps you can take to reduce its level of fear and anxiety.

Progressive Desensitisation

Desensitising your dog to the noises is often possible using quality sound recordings. The aim is to progressively reduce a dog's fear of noises and replace it with calm and accepting behaviour. This is not a 'quick fix' and should be undertaken with assistance from your veterinarian. Some dogs may need medication before starting a desensitisation program so they are calm enough to learn new responses.



for at least five seconds and if it is still in control, feed it tid bits of tasty food such as liver treats.

Ham up the praise by squeaking and squawking at your dog to ensure it is happy. Rub its chest and give it pats. Make its tail wag enthusiastically.

There is also a limit to how closely a recorded storm mimics the real thing. This is because a storm has four components - the sound of the thunder and rain, the sight of the lightning, the smell of the rain or sulphur and the tactile sensations of the vibrations and atmospheric changes. Recordings at best can only produce the sound and some of the vibrations.

Play the recording back at full volume with the dog near to ensure the recording induces the same degree of fear as a real storm. If this is not so, then another solution needs to be found. The better your sound equipment the more likely you are to have effect. Specifically, sub-woofer speakers are essential.

If the recording induces as much trembling and anxiety as the real thing, then you can proceed.

The first step has nothing to do with the recording. All you need to do is to establish a new routine for your dog in which you train it to be happy and content about being in front of your stereo. The process used is one of conditioning and is similar to the famous research of Pavlov who rang a bell and gave a dog food simultaneously. Eventually the dog would salivate when the bell was rung, even if no food was present. For a thunder phobia, the bell is replaced with a mat placed in front of your stereo.

Bring your dog to the mat. Command it to do a simple task such as to 'SIT' or to lie 'DOWN'. If your dog responds, wait

Repeat this SIT/DOWN/PRAISE approximately five times, twice daily for five days. After this time, your dog will look forward to its special time on the mat, in front of your stereo.

Now turn on the recorded storm, but at a very low volume. Continue the 'Jolly Routine' with chest rubs and back scratches with the storm at this low volume. If your dog accepts this level of noise then gradually increase the volume over successive days. Eventually the dog will tolerate a full volume, canned storm.

Desensitisation to Cap Guns and Similar Noises

For noises like cap guns, it is easier to use the real thing, rather than a recording. Balloons, especially water bomb balloons inflated with air, make similar noises to explosions.

To reduce the noise, have an assistant in a far away room with several walls between your assistant and yourself. Signal to him or her when you are ready for an explosion but before you do this ensure you have your dog's attention by giving it a command. The 'Leave' command is a good one to use.

If your dog retains control during the explosion, praise it as before.

To move forward from here, your assistant should gradually come closer, every two to four days, as your dog retrains its calmness.

Ensure Your Dog is Safe

Another vitally important matter is to ensure your dog's safety during a storm. Don't treat a dog's fear of storms lightly. If you are leaving your dog and a storm is likely, you are better confining your dog to a secure room from which it cannot escape. Use the most sound-proof room in your house, such as a walk-in wardrobe which has the added benefit of your smell for comfort. Brick walls are more sound-proof than timber. Covering windows with heavy curtains to block out noise and lightning is also helpful.

Put the dog's water bowl and its bedding in the den to give it a pleasant, comfortable and 'homely' focus and use the conditioning 'Jolly Routine' described above to get your dog used to (and loving) its den before a storm arrives.

What to do During a Storm

What can you do when your dog is scared in the middle of a storm? When your dog is panicking, it needs to develop a calm demeanour. If talking soothingly to your dog serves to calm it that is fine, but trying to reassure a dog that can't calm down can exacerbate the problem.

The behaviour you want is rational, sensible, calm behaviour. Use the calming strategies employed in the desensitisation program above and get your dog to sit or lie on its mat where it associates calm behaviour with praise and reward. The 'Pace and Praise' technique may work for dogs that can't settle on a mat.

Place your dog on a lead and start to pace or move about quickly. Encourage your dog to 'HEEL' with you. Give it some firm commands such as 'SIT' and 'DOWN' and 'tick'

your dog's correct response with immediate praise. Keep working with the dog until you can see that it is starting to respond and that it is focusing more on you than on the storm. As it comes back into order, start leaving more space between the command and the 'tick' of praise that follows. It is unlikely that your paranoid pooch will be totally calm, but at least this technique should make it controllable.

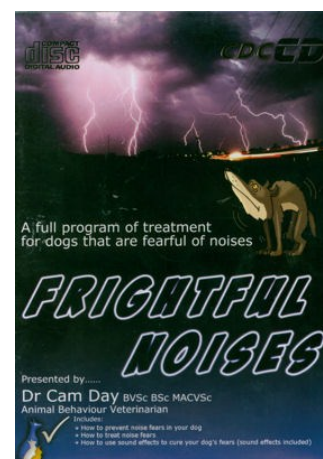
Recommence the 'Pace and Praise' technique if your dog starts to become anxious again.

Medications for Noise Fears

With noise fears, the sensible use of anti-anxiety medication is often a good idea, and is often essential to stop a dog injuring itself. If your dog is seriously affected, anti-anxiety medications that alter serotonin metabolism may be prescribed. These can take up to 6-8 weeks to take effect. Some dogs may need to remain on the medication for 6-12 months before tapering off, while others may require medication long term.

Short-term anti-anxiety medication may also be useful, especially for dogs that display panic attacks, and can be used on an as-needed basis. These need to be given approximately 1-2 hours before the storm but the dose needs to be tested before the event to know what dose is effective, how long it takes to work and how long it lasts for in your dog.

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Dr Cam Day's CD is available from
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