

Fear of Thunder & Loud Noises

Many dogs are frightened by sudden loud noises such as fireworks or thunder even if they've never experienced a traumatic event in association with the sounds. For some dogs this fear approaches the level of a phobia, sending them into a blind panic during every thunderstorm or celebration.

In addition to the distress it causes the dog, this panic can lead to destructive or dangerous behavior. Dogs trying to escape from the noise can jump fences, claw at doors, and climb or knock over furniture. The anxiety may lead formerly well-behaved dogs to chew or tear apart items in the house or yard. A dog that gets out of the yard may run miles trying to escape.

Provide Your Dog With A Safe Place

If your dog goes into hiding when they hear frightening noises, make sure they have a safe place to retreat to. You'll have to watch your dog to determine what they consider a safe place. This may be as simple as making sure the dog always has access to a place where they like to hide – for instance, under your bed or in a closet.

You can also create a "hidey-hole" that's dark, small and shielded from the frightening sound as much as possible (a fan or radio playing will help block out the sound). However, keep in mind that the dog's safe place needs to be a place they'll retreat to on their own. You can encourage the dog to go there when they're fearful, but don't put them there. Forcing the dog into their retreat or confining them there will only make them feel more anxious.

Distract Your Dog

The "safe place" approach doesn't work with all dogs. Some dogs are motivated to move and be active when frightened, and hiding out won't help them feel less fearful. For these dogs, distracting them with an active game might work better.

This method works best when your dog is just beginning to get anxious. Encourage them to engage in any activity that captures their attention and helps them release some of their agitation. When your dog first notices the noise and is watchful, but not showing fearful behavior, immediately try to interest them in doing something they really enjoy, like playing fetch or tug. Give them a lot of praise and treats for paying attention to the game.

As the storm or the noise builds, you may not be able to keep their attention on the activity, but it might delay the start of the fearful behavior for longer and longer each time you do it. If you can't keep their attention and they begin acting afraid, stop the process. If you continue, you may inadvertently associate the game with the noise.

Reducing Your Dog's Fear

Counterconditioning and desensitization are behavior modification techniques that are useful in reducing fears and phobias. The goal is to condition your dog to respond in non-fearful ways to sounds and other stimuli that frighten them.

This process must be done very gradually and without exposing your dog to too much at one time. You will pair the noise, at a very low volume, with something pleasant such as a treat or a game that your dog enjoys. Gradually, you will increase the volume of the noise but never to a point that your dog loses interest in the treats or game. Through this process, your dog will begin to associate good things with a previously feared sound.

1. Search on Youtube, for noises such as thunderstorms, fireworks, fire truck sirens, or any other noise your dog needs acclimation with.
2. Play the video at such a low volume that your dog only notices the sound but does not respond it with any more than ears pricked or flicking.
3. Offer your dog a delicious treat, something really special like cheese or chicken should be used. If your dog is willing to accept the treat then proceed. If your dog is too distracted by the noise to take the treat, end your session and try again later with the volume a bit lower.
4. If your dog is willing to take a treat, continue treating your dog while the sound is playing. You may also play with your dog while the sound is playing. Engage your dog in an activity they enjoy such as fetch, tug, or trick training.
5. In the next session, increase the volume a little bit and repeat.
6. Continue increasing volume over a series of sessions. If at any time your dog becomes fearful, STOP. End your session and try again later with the volume set lower.

Never punish your dog for their fearful response or try to force your dog to experience the sounds or be close to the sounds that they are afraid of. This can cause their fear to be worse and could result in your dog becoming aggressive in an attempt to escape from the situation.